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WANDERING STARS

TOGETHER WITH

THE LOVER

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

NOVELS

REGIMENT OF WOMEN

FIRST THE BLADE

LEGEND

PLAYS

A BILL OF DIVORCEMENT

WILL SHAKESPEARE

THE WAY THINGS HAPPEN

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WANDERING STARS

TOGETHER WITH
THE LOVER

BY
CLEMENCE DANE



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IN MEMORY

S. H.

THE LOVER

“We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen : for the things which are seen are temporal ; but the things which are not seen are eternal.”—II CORINTHIANS.

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SHE was frightened.

She had said to herself, excusing him—‘ If we had had children—— ’ and for the first time in her married life the phrase had failed her.

For twenty years she had steadied thus the gallant cockle-boat of her belief in him—He’s a coming man. He’s outgrown me. . . . But if we had had children—— and so continued to dwell tenderly on him as he should have been, as he would have been, as he was, to her humble and hopeful eyes. If he had had a happier childhood, a less burdened youth . . . if success had come less suddenly . . . if—always it slipped back to that woman’s remedy—if there had been children. . . .

Why, she demanded of her shaken heart, why on this moonlit night of summer should she suddenly become aware that she had lost belief in the articles of her creed? Why should her glance at him have so cruelly enlightened her? Or was it no new revelation—had she indeed lived these twenty years wilfully and resolutely blind?

She contemplated him, stretched out before her

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in his slouch chair on the other side of the drowsing hearth. His chin was on his breast: his cigar had slipped from his lips and rolled itself, scattering its length of ash, into a crease of unbuttoned waistcoat. He was flushed and flabby and breathed noisily in his sleep. Her eyes dwelt upon his short-fingered, well-kept hands, upon his small mouth that even in after-dinner stupor shut itself firmly: dwelt upon them as desperately as an emigrant dwells upon his last glimpses of familiar land. Those hands, that precise and close-shutting mouth, belonged to the man she had married; but was this the rest of him? What had this flesh and blood to do with the dear likeness that she had received into her heart, that hung there still, the altarpiece of a chapel ardent? This was—what? Her revolting mind flung out in answer epithets which shocked her—‘Gross,’ ‘brutish,’ ‘bestial’—‘If you stripped off his clothes it would be—a pinkish beast lying there—out of a sty. . . .’

‘They hunted and they hollered and the next thing they did find,

Was a fat pig smiling in a ditch and that they left behind. . . .’

And then to her shuddering soul—‘Oh, stop ! Stop thinking ! For pity’s sake ! This isn’t he ! Harry, this isn’t you ! Harry !’

His head dropped forward, his preliminary to

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waking. She called again to him in thought with the whole strength and passion of her spirit—
'Harry ! Harry !'

He regarded her with glazed eyes for a moment and nodded anew.

She watched him breathlessly. On the hard-trodden surfaces of her nature, do what life would to seal them, the small cracks were ever reappearing through which would spurt up from the depths odd fumes and flickers of phantasy or surmise or belief. They were no more to be got rid of than the untidy streamers of soft hair about her forehead were to be confined in the hair-net she wore and caught on bushes in the garden, or twitched off with the hard straw hat she had forgotten to line. And, though she was a simple woman who knew not Flammarion and had never heard of Freud, the flamelet that most warmed her was the belief that if, as she phrased it, she 'thought hard enough,' she would somehow, some day, 'get through to Harry,' and in spite of the shackles that her very love for him had laid upon her, in spite of his inhibiting silences and increasing absorption in a life he would not allow her to share, be at last enabled to discover the secrets of his personality and her own, to marry him in the spirit as well as in the flesh.

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The hope never left her. It supported her days and dramatized her nights. She had dreamed only the night before (she was one of your regular and fantastic dreamers) a nightmare medley of mediaeval prisons and Harry on his road to the scaffold. And she had run at his side between the corridors of faces weeping bitterly, not daring to implore—what? of him in his dream agony: till he had turned and said roughly—‘ Well, what do you *want* me to say then? ‘ That I love you, I suppose! ’ And she heard herself answer, her tongue loosened—‘ No, no, no! Only that you know I love you. I don’t expect any more. I understand you and you understand me. Don’t we understand each other?’ ‘ That’s it!’ he had nodded, his death upon him, and she had caught his hand and covered it with kisses ere the nightmare closed in upon them again in shadows and distortion. But when she woke with swollen cheeks to see him beside her on the pillow, she wept anew in hopeless grief that even in the house of sleep she could not find courage to declare her desires, that even in dreams she was doomed to hold him only by feigned acquiescence in their unequal and unfair bargain.

‘ Was it not an unfair bargain? Was it not?’ she demanded passionately of the relaxed figure

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opposite, and resumed her intent watch of him, unable to believe that such outcry of her soul should go unheard by his. But it was the telephone bell that woke them, the one from his sleep, the other from her dreams.

He jerked his head towards the receiver.

"See what it is!"

She obeyed. A woman's voice came through.

"That you, Harry?" And then—"Oh, who are you?"

She said gently—

"What number do you want?"

"Who are you?" the voice countered.

She was obstinate—

"What number do you want?"

The voice conceded it ungraciously—"Is that—er—I want Mr. Peile—Mr. Harry Peile."

She held out the receiver to her husband.

"Some lady wants you," and watched him jump from his chair, suddenly alert. She sat down again, not listening to the careful monologue that followed. Harmless? Of course it was harmless; but she had seen his eyes light up. Once she would have had her pang at his smiles into the receiver, at his body supplementing instinctively with hitch and gesture and shift of weight, the import of the bitten-off sentences. Once his

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explanations to her, as he hung up the instrument again, would have hurt her till the answering, believing smile grew stiff upon her face; but that too was past. She was ready and waiting for his—‘ Well, I’m going out! ’ at the end of them. But in her heart she said—‘ He’s going to that woman.’

“ Well, I’m going out.”

An unwonted courage took her—

“ Where? ” and deserted her once more as his eyebrows lifted.

“ Bridge.”

“ Where? ” she said again, scarcely above her breath. It was possible, she told herself when he did not answer, that he had not heard her. She made another effort—“ I wish you could take me.”

He said, without expression, as he lighted a fresh cigar—

“ Come if you like.”

She hesitated—

“ Would you like me to come? ”

He yawned.

“ Bridge doesn’t amuse you, does it? ” And then, indifferently—“ Coming? ”

She shook her head, smiling the satisfied smile that she knew he required of her. That pleased him. He nodded amicably to her as he went out of the room.

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“ Harry! ” she called again softly after him.

He did not hear. In another moment the front door had slammed.

She sat a little while staring at his empty chair.

The tragedy of everyday life is, in effect, its lack of tragedy, the infinite protraction of its catastrophe. The death of love and lovers in three acts can always quicken our pulses; but the love that will not die when the last curtain falls, that continues to cling tenaciously to existence, that will maul and bruise and batter till no outline of its spring shape of beauty remains, till it becomes a mere tentacle of the will and yet still clings in death grips with its oppressor, that is a death of love in five, ten, fifteen, twenty acts, unsuited to the muse. It becomes the mere suburban movie-show of a thousand households, too common a happening to stir our sympathies or to find a place upon our stage.

Yet precisely this monotonous tragedy was in her household, she thought, reaching its long delayed last act. The telephone bell had rung the curtain up. When he returned she was minded to let him find it rung down again for ever. He had gone to that woman. . . . What woman? . . . She did not know: she would not enquire. For—five acts, was it, or more?—five acts, five years, to her

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certain knowledge there had been a 'that woman!' between them. If there had been children she might have kept him, she told herself; but he had been too poor to afford children in those early days. 'Am I not better to thee than ten sons?' he had said to her in his own way, not in words, with the look in his eyes, with his gesture, his smile. And she had rejoiced that he knew her heart, rejoiced because speech was difficult to them both, and to her, in her awe of his beauty and power, doubly difficult. She was so stammeringly anxious to please him, and he was not easy to please. In the cowardice of her love she let herself rely on his to act as her interpreter until the auspicious moment should arrive. 'When we are married we shall be able to talk.' And they were married and they did not talk. He led: she followed. He directed: she obeyed. He was busy: she did not disturb him. In a trice the lines of their life were laid down. They did not talk. He knew no more of her than he had learned in the brief forgotten months of their prologue: and she continued to know him as two personalities who would not merge, as the almost legendary lover of her girlhood and as the husband whom she fed by day and comforted by night, until he made money enough to buy his foods and comforts where he

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chose. If there had been children. . . . But she had never again asked of him her children.

She got up at last from her place by the dead summer fire, straightened mechanically the crushed cushions of his chair and went away to their room. Through the big unblinded windows (her mind noted through its misery that the housemaid must be called to order on the morrow) the moon shone in upon it, touching the furniture with unfamiliar high-lights and turning the far corners into pits of blackness.

She thought—How queer and beautiful it looks! Not my room any more. . . . Once I should have been afraid of ghosts; but I am not afraid of anything nowadays—except Harry. My fault—but he sucks away my courage. . . . I wonder if she's afraid of him—that woman? . . . Does she love him? How can she? She only knows that—that outside Harry, that gross old body, those pocketfuls of money that he jingles. . . . That's not my Harry. . . . Or is it? Have I been dreaming all my life? . . . But if there's no more to him than that, then I've worshipped an animal. Then I ought to die. I've defiled myself. I'm not fit to live. . . . That's selfish: what do I matter? But if there's no Harry, if he has never existed, then I won't live! Then I can't live.

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I've no children. . . . There's nothing to keep me. . . . Why shouldn't I have peace? . . .

Peace! The word stung her mind like the remembrance of a kiss. Peace! Now it was a word spoken in her ear—spoken by a friendly voice. She half turned in her chair as if to discover the speaker, and caught with a sense of shock a sight of herself in the mirror on the wall. Mirror and moonlight exposed her cruelly. She realized for the first time that the years had sharpened her features, that the faint almond-blossom flush of her girlhood had set and dried into the skin about her cheekbones, that her grey hair and girlish figure cancelled each other and left her, ineffectual, unimpressive, a poor wraith of the 'nineties in a modern frock.

With trembling lip and no pride at all to help her she translated what she saw into her own simple phrases.

I'm growing ugly, she thought, ugly as well as old. . . . It's no wonder I bore him, poor Harry! . . . He's taken and taken and taken until I'm empty. . . . If we had had children. . . . In another five years I'll be too old to have children. . . . He's been cruel to me, poor Harry! Oh, he has been cruel! . . . 'Come if you like!' . . . It's his cold voice that hurts so. 'Come if you like, damn you!' That's

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what he means. . . . Oh, my God, and I love him so ! You'd think I'd be cured after fifteen years. I wish I were dead—oh, I wish I were dead! . . .

She stared at the staring mirror till her tears blurred the sight of her own image.

She thought—It's the bother of dying I dread. I'm so crazily tired. . . . I don't want a fuss. . . . And, of course, I don't want him worried; but if I got out he'd marry her—that woman. She might give him something I can't. . . . Stuff like aspirin would do it if you took enough. . . . But that's too much trouble, too, when there's a window . . . leaning out to pick roses . . . so easy . . .

Said her husband's voice at her ear—

“Hetty! Hetty! *Don't!*”

With a scream she regained her balance and turned to face him.

“I—I was only just picking a rose. So sweet——” she faltered, to avert, if it might be, the rapped out, contemptuous words of reproof that she dreaded more than a stoning; for his voice had held acute and terrifying comprehension of her purpose. Then, her voice jumping an octave—
“Harry, where are you? Harry!”

The room was empty.

She said after a moment, slowly—

“I'm going mad. That's what it is: I'm so

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miserable that I'm going mad. You know, I thought I heard Harry calling. He's out. I locked the door myself. He hasn't called me Hetty for years."

"Hetty! Hetty darling!" said his voice.

She turned this way and that, knees knocking together. The boat of the moon, dimming and brightening the air with each dip in and out of the cloud banks, the shadows of the leaves capering across the wall-paper as the wind pounced like a kitten at the trails of roses it had already shaken clear of the casement, the sudden airs puffing out the curtains and stirring the hangings of the bed, all helped to create confusion in her mind. She wanted to switch on the electric lights, the hard practical lights that no ghost or whimsey of the night can stand up against, but to reach them she must pass the mirror: and the mirror frightened her. The surface shone brightly, but behind its polish the reflection of herself was curiously indistinct, was, not so much losing its lines as—doubling them!

She thought—It's the tears on my eyelashes . . . and wiped them hastily away. But the doubled images only grew clearer. Then she cried shrilly—

"Harry, if you're hiding anywhere, it's a bad joke! Come out! You're frightening me!"

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“Coming!” said his voice.

The mirror blurred as if it had been breathed upon from within. Her own reflection was gone, and gone the double of window-frame and curtain, of dancing grey roses and uneasy moon; but within the veiled surface something, she knew, moved and speedily would emerge. She could feel and follow its motions as clearly as she could feel and discern, though she could not see, the progress of the moon behind the triple fleeces which for the moment, only for the moment, had extinguished it. It would reappear in glory, it would arise and shine again. A phrase from nowhere ran in her head like a song of triumph—‘At eventide there shall be light!’ Suddenly all fear left her. She was shaken with tremors of delight as she stood, her hands still clutching at the wall behind her for the support she did not need; for she was waiting for the moon to burst its bondage and her own, for the moon and the mirror—for the mirror—?

Then the moon’s rim found a tatter in the clouds, and across the dulled surface that she watched in such unaccountable expectation its reflected radiance spread like a smile and grew in brightness till she was forced to shut her dazzled eyes.

When she opened them again the husband of

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her heart was standing in front of her, laughing and holding out his hands.

She did not stop to think, to question, to analyse: she ran to him, content to be held close and kissed and soothed as she steadied her shaking body against him. He was solid and warm under her clutching fingers: that was enough for her. But all the while he was the upright youthful man of fifteen years ago, with tanned firm cheeks, thick hair, and no more than the beginning of his stoop; but all the while he looked at her as if—the old clumsy longing phrase shot triumphantly through her mind—as if she mattered to him; but all the while his voice—his voice—what was this warming change in his voice? She shook herself free and caught him in turn by the shoulders, as the words tumbled from her with schoolgirl vehemence—

“Answer me! When you’re going somewhere, anywhere, to your friends, and I ask you to take me, what do you say, Harry?”

His eyes teased her—

“Come, if you like, of course!”

“You’d want me to come?” she triumphed.

He dropped lazily into a chair—

“Bridge doesn’t amuse you, does it? Let’s stay here.”

She said weakly, staring down at him, her finger

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at her lip in the childish gesture that had always annoyed Harry—

“ I don’t understand.”

“ Why try? ” said he with, yes, unbelievably, with the twinkle he had first mislaid in the rubber boom of 1910. “ We’re happy enough as we are.”

She said—

“ But—but—you’re Harry? ”

“ Sure! ” It was the trick he had picked up during their honeymoon trip to the States, a trick long ago lost again.

“ But Harry—but Harry’s out! ”

“ Oh, him! ” said the boy, her husband, contemptuously.

“ Oh! ” she cried, stretching out her childless arms to him, “ what are you, what are you? ”

His eyes spoke to her, not his voice—

“ The man you married.”

And at that—

“ I knew it! ” she whispered, awed. “ I always believed, always——”

“ I shouldn’t be here if you hadn’t,” he told her.

She confessed, shamefaced—

“ To-night I didn’t. I lost faith. I was going to kill myself.”

“ Yes,” he said, “ that’s why you see me. You put me out, out of yourself. You turned me out.

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And if you'd killed yourself, what should I have done? "

"Oh!" she cried painfully, "you'd have cared then? It would have hurt you? "

He said with his familiar air of washing his hands of all responsibility, even for himself—

"Where should I have gone? "

She told him, her eyes rejoicing in him with every glance, every movement of her lips a caress for him as well as a word spoken—

"Everybody must love you! Everybody must want you! That's why I can never blame him—blame you, I mean. You—him—my Harry! Oh, it's so absurd! But people have always wanted him."

He shook his head. His voice was a tune in her ears, delightful to listen to as he answered her—

"Nobody wants me but you. Nobody sees me but you. Homeless, bodiless, deaf, dumb, blind—that's me—except when I'm with you. That's why I love you."

"Do you love me? Do you, Harry? Did you never stop? "

His eyes told her that he had never stopped. But she could not believe it. It was too exquisite to be true. She held out her bare palms to him—

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"Oh!" she cried, "then why have you hurt me so—so many times?"

"Not I!" he said.

"He," she corrected, "he and you."

"Your fault," he told her.

"Mine? He and you, you were one person once. Not my fault."

"Your fault. You drew me."

"Out of him?"

"Into your heart. He and I, we were one man, one ordinary man. Good enough, you know. Good enough to go round. But you, you wouldn't believe that. You left him nothing. You took the best of him out of him, out, away, into yourself."

"To make my son with, Harry!" she cried suddenly, pitifully. "Can't you understand? I wanted your child so when I was young. All you were to me—oh, you were God to me!—I took into my heart to look at, to think about, a pattern to make my children from. Harry of the daytime, the shop, the business—he hadn't time for me. He wasn't you."

"He was once," he said, his head in his hands.

She stared at him, her face very white.

"Perhaps," she said, "it's—been my fault—as well."

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"Perhaps!" said the living thought that she had fashioned.

She peered through shadows at that shadow.

"Don't go away from me!" she cried shrilly.

"Not yet! Give me time!"

"I'm yours—your own." The voice was full of all the tones she had willed and hungered for.

She was as one wrestling in prayer—

"I'll make it all right. I'll make it up to him. I'll get him back—himself—himself again. But don't go yet! I'm not strong enough—not yet. Stay now I've got you, a little while. I've wanted you so. Oh, I've been unhappy! I want a little peace." And then, with a start, as she saw him lift his head, listening, "What is it?"

He said—

"Harry! He's walking down the road. In a moment he'll turn in at the gate."

"How do you know?"

Again he smiled at her, his quick beloved smile at her slow ways.

"Why," said he, "I'm Harry."

She caught at him. She could not but think him real when he held her so close.

"Fairy-tales—" she cried hysterically—"I don't believe in them. But I believe in you."

"Good enough!" he said, and, stooping, kissed

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her. Indeed, ghost or no ghost, dream or no dream, she thought that he kissed her. She felt his lips on her mouth. It went blissfully through her mind that she was wrong, that here, indeed, she was awake, that those steps she could hear, clearer, closer, clearer, were part of the dream and not the waking. Familiar steps they were, coming heavily up the stairs. But the quiver, at those sounds, that went through the substance she grasped, the stir in him and straining forth from her, as of a flag at the signal of its winds, were enough to bring her into a new state of being. She passed in the instant from the exquisite repose of a wild creature sunning itself, to the same creature surprised, still as a stone, nostrils dilated, its very eyeballs motionless with alarm.

The handle turned. She flung out a guardian arm between him and the mirror, as if it were a pit into which he might fall.

“You shan’t go again. Stay with me! I tell you he shan’t come in.”

He said, smiling—

“Let him come! No harm.”

But she held him the faster—

“If he comes in I shall lose you again——”

And then, still holding him, turned as the handle rattled, to face the door. But she should not have

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taken her eyes from him. In an instant, as in a dream, he had escaped her. The room was empty once more save for her bewildered self and her husband's voice muffled by the woodwork. He was knocking and shouting at once—

“What's the matter? I tell you to let me in!”

And then from beneath her window—and her tautened sense could detect no difference of note—

“Come into the garden! Come out to me! Hetty, come!”

“Coming! Coming!” she answered them both, with a command of the incredible situation of which she herself was delightedly conscious—“Coming!”—and for the first time that she could remember, kept her man waiting her good pleasure while she snatched a wrap from a seldom opened drawer and by some unaccountable impulse veiled her head and shoulders in the long forgotten fashion of her youth. Ay, and paused before the mirror to let it show her to herself with eyes that shone like the silver cracks and pools upon its ancient surface, with flaming cheeks and grey hair hidden away beneath the faded rosy chiffon. Then she turned the key.

Her husband brushed angrily by her.

“In the dark—in the dark?” he began: and then, as he switched on the lights—“Dressed?”

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At this hour? What are you doing? Why did you lock the door? Why do you stand there staring as if you were crazy?"

"I *am* crazy," she told him delightedly. Her smile was as broad as that of a child in mischief. "It's the moon. I believe I'll go for a walk."

"You'll come to bed," said he. But she was back at the window once more, staring out and down into the black and white garden. The minutes passed in a silence broken only by his movements about the room.

"Come along now!" he repeated impatiently. And then, as she neither stirred nor spoke—"What are you looking for? What's the matter with you?"

"I'm happy," she said.

"Is that something new?" There was pure injury in his tone.

"Quite new." She turned to him, still smiling. "Entirely new." And then, as she slipped away across the room—"I *am* going out, Harry. The moonlight's too mad to miss. 'Night!"

"Turn on those lights!" he commanded; for, as she spoke, she had slipped out a hand with a gesture that reminded him, in its graceful and deliberate perversity, of a scene upon the stage, and had plunged him blinking into darkness

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again, a darkness in which he could discern no more of her than a half outline, a silver edge of head and neck and drapery framed against the pitch black of the passage way like a double of the sickle moon framed in the window-square of night.

"Hester! D'you hear me? Put that light on!" he began, and saw her full face for a moment, still moonlike, as she turned her head. There was a silver glint of teeth as her lips parted in a laugh.

"Come if you like!" she said: stood a moment, as if listening, and was gone.

He said hotly—

"Woman's crazy!" but he did not follow her. Indeed, with her going, she passed for the moment from his mind. He had worries enough of his own, he told himself, as he pulled his shirt over his head. He had a heavy day's work behind him and another in front. He wished he had not gone out. Isabel had no sense of time and place. He had told her that it was a full week with him, yet she must dance him out in the evening on a whim.... And then her rooms were full.... Mackail had been there. . . . She knew he wished to avoid Mackail. . . . And the service was bad. When a man paid for his comforts, he at least expected—but Isabel could never keep servants. Not that he blamed them: to serve

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Isabel was like serving a cockatoo. And now, when he came home to a little peace and quiet . . . but women were all alike! . . .

He got into bed.

But for some time he could not rest. His wife's absence disturbed him: he missed her warmth at his side. The curtains flapped incessantly to and fro, running the moonlight on and off his face like quicksilver. He had never known before that birds woke and chirruped in the night. Once he got up and went to the window because he thought he heard his wife's voice answering someone. But she was alone when he looked out, wandering up and down among the ghostly hollyhocks on the other side of the lawn, like a new-made shade amid the long-accustomed dead. And yet, no sooner did he drowse again than again he half heard, half dreamed the hum of continuous speech. Once he could have sworn that his own name floated up to him—"Harry! dear Harry!"

He strained his ears, raising himself on his elbow; but ever as the sounds neared his window they were merged again in the rustle of the roses, in the whimpering of unknown creatures of the night.

He could stand it no longer.

"Do you know it's three o'clock?" he called to

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her, his eye on the luminous watch beside him. And this time she answered him from beneath the window with such everyday distinctness that he shrugged at himself for dreaming that the dim sounds he had heard could have been indeed her voice.

“I’ll come! I’m coming!” she cried up to him; and a moment later she stole in.

Drowsily he watched her slip off her clothes and prepare for bed. It occurred to him that Isabel would have looked ridiculous in that plain white garment that had no scent to it but the scent of washed linen. He watched her brush out her hair with long soft stroking gestures that were oddly soothing to follow. Presently she lay down beside him. Satisfied, he turned on his pillow and fell asleep.

II

Hester Peile on her thirty-seventh birthday felt fifty and looked it.

‘Poor Hester Peile! Money isn’t everything. They say, you know, that he—— Yes. In Maida Vale. At least, that’s what my husband—— Of course, Peile’s got the brains. And you can’t get away from it, she is boring—no sparkle—very

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sweet, of course, but you've got to be up to a man nowadays. She can't see that—poor Hester!—poor Hester Peile!'

Yet Hester Peile on her thirty-eighth birthday looked thirty-five and felt——? But Hester Peile had never taken anyone into her confidence as to her feelings: that was what troubled the neighbourhood. A woman cannot talk to her acquaintances as if she saw them through glasses, peering down upon them from the ramparts of an enchanted castle half-hidden in shining mists: a woman cannot continue her daily life as she has lived it in all the neighbours' sight and yet simultaneously manage to enwrap herself in new and delicate dignity: a woman cannot, in short, dance her way widdershins to youth and happiness without having to choose between comments and a confidant.

'What did Mrs. Peile do with herself all day long? Did anyone know? Why had she ceased to pay her dreary little calls upon you? Where had she acquired that ridiculous air of satisfaction? And why did she buy so many new clothes—and from Lucille?—Why did she forget sometimes to bow to you when she met you in the street? Why—to sum it all up—did she behave like a school-girl newly fallen in love?'

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The neighbourhood did not like it—could not be expected to like it.

‘ And what was this last tale of a man seen—no, not seen, *heard* about the house whenever Mr. Peile was away? Poor Mr. Peile! Of course, I never pay any attention to servants, but really—Oh, I know I used to be sorry for Hester Peile; but there’s a limit. She must be forty if she’s a day. And in such execrable taste, don’t you think? My dear, they were seen, actually seen together late at night!—No, nobody knows who it is—shadows, you know, on the blind! It’s the husband I’m sorry for. Oh, entirely unsuspecting!—He ought to be told! ’

And told in the end he was.

It was Isabel, Isabel of the sofa cushions and the diamonded fingers who at last sounded the rumours in his ears, and in the doing snapped their long frayed relationship for ever. Isabel had always intended to marry him eventually. He knew it without disturbance. If she would not take his explanation that it was out of the question, so much the worse for her. But lately she had wearied him with her hints and suppositions and cajolings, though for the sake of the poor muddy passion she had once stirred up in him he was ready to spare her vanity, even when she forced

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him with a direct question. He would say to her no more than—"Divorce me? My dear Isabel, I can't afford to let her. I'm standing for Parliament at the next election." And then one day, and fatally for her, she had said to him, with a glance of her eyes like the flick of a lead pellet—"Why not get one from her?" and then, as his face crimsoned to an outrage beyond her comprehension, outrage so immense that speech was choked in his mouth, she had added—"My dear boy, surely you must know——" and broken off with the croaking laugh which had once attracted him.

He felt himself tremble with a sick chill, angry as he was.

"Know what?" he said. He would not meet her eyes nor respond to the appeasing smile she gave him. He only knew that he had long endured her merely, and that now he hated her. But she was eager—

"Lord knows, I'm not one to tell tales. I suppose she's had something to bear. But it's you I'm thinking of, Harry. With everyone talking, it's a shame you shouldn't know."

"Know what?"

"My dear, you're hurting me. My rings are cutting into me. Look!"

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"Know what? What do they say about my wife?"

"And at her age, too! Mind, I'm not sure that I believe it, but everyone says so."

"Says what?"

"Well, if you must know—she—she's sly, Harry! Harry, you could divorce her: it could be done. She's got a lover. Ask anyone!"

He stared at her with such complete lack of expression that she was emboldened—

"Harry, dear, it's a shock to you, of course. You're too good. You believe in everyone. But *I* always knew. She's not good enough for you—honest. Harry! Harry, darling! Harry, don't look like that!" And so descended lovingly upon him, all fluttering hands and eyelids, settling upon him like a flock of pigeons, arms about his neck, to draw him down. But he shook off her touch with a roughness that almost overbalanced her and she fell back awkwardly among the cushions. He made no effort to help her, but stood regarding her, dispassionately, as if she were a spectacle on a stage, a spectacle that held his eyes but not his thoughts. His heavy face was darkly flushed, his obstinate mouth set. She had risen to her feet again and was straightening her gown with furious shaking fingers before he said, paying out his

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words as if they were gold—"I'm fed up with lies!" and with no more farewell turned and left the room.

"Watch for yourself, then!" she shrilled after him. But if he heard he made no answer.

She waited a moment as if expecting his return, then, crossing to the window, peered out. He was crossing the street with his solid air of shouldering the traffic aside.

"He *is* a man!" she said, with a shrug that was half temper, half sensuous pleasure. "You wouldn't have thought now that he'd get so jealous—and of *her*!" Her disordered hair caught her eye as she turned into the room and she fell to patting it into place, reassuring herself as she did so—"He'll come back. He couldn't break off like that, just for a word——"

For all that, with uneasy consciousness that the little scene had not gone as she had rehearsed it, she sat down before the guests of the evening came and wrote to him. She flattered herself as she clicketed down to the pillar-box in her high-heeled golden shoes that she could write a letter. It was barely five o'clock. It ought to reach him that night.

But Harry Peile did not go home that night. That would mean altering his plans, and in his new fury of contempt for her he would not permit

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anything Isabel might say to alter them, not now nor at any future time. It was his wife that she had attacked—his own wife! Slandrous nonsense! And absurd, too, to anyone who knew Hester as he and he only could know her. Poor Hester; poor inert Hester to be accused of flightiness and worse! . . . The whole matter, of course, was not worth a thought, and not another thought would he give it. He would not! Not another thought! . . . True, he himself, now he came to consider it, had not been unaware of a certain change in Hester in the last few months—very slight—probably a question of health. She was certainly looking better. . . . Younger. . . . For his part he was glad to see her taking an interest in life, if not in him. He thought, with an uneasy chuckle, that at least he was not burdened with a jealous wife as well as a—ah, well! Isabel had been fond of him. That excused her much. Hester never asked where he went—nor cared. Why, night after night lately she had left him to himself and gone off—where? He supposed her nine o'clock headaches *were* genuine? What did Isabel—Isabel was outrageous! He would not waste another thought. Yes, yes, he had said all that before. . . .

He smouldered through the long hot week

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of business and pleasure like a slow fuse, and coming down by the packed five o'clock train on the last Friday of a merciless July he himself felt that an explosion was overdue. And the car had not been sent to meet him! There was not a taxi to be had. That meant twenty minutes' walk in the heat, in the terrible heat! Now why had Hester forgotten to order the car? . . . The omission at that moment damned her more than all Isabel's chatter.

But, heat or no heat, his splendid shrubberies and his ordered trees greeted him at last, and between them his ample house showed a sunlit face. But Hester was in none of the rooms. The maid hadn't seen Mrs. Peile since breakfast, sir. Mrs. Peile often went out for the whole day. "Yes, sir, took her lunch. Would you be in to dinner, sir? No, sir, no orders." And then, in afterthought—"If you please, sir, Mrs. Peile sometimes goes out through the little wood."

He nodded dismissal. So that was why Hester had not ordered the car! . . . Out all day, was she, neglecting her house and her duties? Not that he grudged her her pleasures. . . . Not he. . . . Not any reasonable pleasures. But this gipsying out all day and every day—it was unsuitable. What would the staff think? Come to think of it,

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the girl's manner had been, not exactly impertinent, but—odd . . . unsatisfactory. . . .

He turned into the lobby. Through the wire-blinded windows he could dimly overlook the servants' quarters. The voices of the maids at work came up to him. They had carried out one of the wooden tables and were sitting round it under the mulberry tree. Watching them absently, as he rinsed his hands, he saw the girl who had waited on him go running out, streamers flying. The cook shelled peas continuously, but her interest was all for the newcomer, as her open mouth showed. The other maids leaned forward, elbows planted squarely, chins on fists. Followed laughter and a pantomime of hand and glance vaguely familiar, and it dawned on him after a moment that the girl was rehearsing to her fellows the conversation with himself. But what had he said to her that needed so much re-telling? Suddenly and distinctly a sentence disentangled itself and floated up to him—"And every night, too, mark you! Regular as clockwork! I don't hold with such goings-on."

Once more, for all the evening was breathless with heat, a sick familiar chill stole over him. He folded the towel with great precision and hung it once more upon the rail. Servants' gossip! . . .

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Nothing to do with him. . . . Was he to play eavesdropper on servants? He turned, uneasy and ashamed, and hurried out of the house.

His steps took him the accustomed way. He was proud of his glass. He was standing in the first of the houses, the greenhouse that ran level with the drive, when a man, an under-gardener of his own, came up on his bicycle, dismounted, leant it carelessly against the laden boughs of a plum, entered whistling, saw him, and ridiculously, inexplicably started, whitening under his weather-beaten tan. He noticed the oddity of it even as he said angrily—

“The plum, Hirst! The plum! What are you dreaming of? Propping your bicycle on the plum!”

But the man only gulped and stared the more as he answered—

“Lord, sir, you did come along quick, sir! You give me quite a turn!”

He frowned. He liked life orderly and to the point. In an underling, agitation, particularly unexplained agitation, was entirely out of place.

“I told you to lift your bicycle. It’s breaking the branch.” Then, with a sudden recollection of the lad’s position as a foundling of Hester’s, as a youngster with a doleful little wife and a doleful

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little past, he added suspiciously—"Here, what's the matter with you?"

But his eyes were met resentfully:

"Nothing, sir! I haven't touched a drop. But I saw you myself not five minutes ago down by the mistress's wood, talking to the mistress." He mopped his streaming face. "It's seeing you here so sudden-like, beat me. Don't know how you got here, sir! I come along pretty quick!"

That was it, he thought, drunk! Drunk, of course! There was no helping these people. . . . Then, with a sudden terrible quickening of interest, dismissed that sanity of conclusion:

"Is your mistress——?"

"Down in the wood, sir! On the little bench. Where you always sit."

"Always sit?"

"Beg pardon, sir! Seen you down there most evenings through the trees. Beats me, though, how you——" He checked himself respectfully. For a moment he waited as if for an answer, then he began to busy himself with the thick growing tomato plants to right and left of them, and mechanically Harry Peile followed his example, nipping away the useless shoots, deftly, three to the gardener's one, though his mind, occupied with his problem, knew nothing of the pleasant-

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smelling green stuff he crushed between his fingers.

What was he to do? . . . He could not say to his servant—‘Describe him, this man you mistook for me! How often have you seen him before? Have you never seen his face? Have you met him elsewhere? What did they talk about? Were you near enough to hear? Did your mistress——?’ And so pulled himself up short. Had it come to that, that he must get his news and his proofs of the infidelity of his own wife—— Again he checked himself. He was going too fast. . . . Hester was not Isabel. . . .

He said slowly, elaborately—

“I took a short cut across the beds because”—he was bad at invention—“your mistress——” Again he paused; then a bodgeful of half ripe peaches caught his eye and gave him an idea. “Your mistress had a fancy for some fruit. I’m taking it down.”

“Not those, sir; they’re stewing. I’ll pick you some ripe ones, sir!”

He chafed at the man’s officiousness. Nevertheless he controlled himself, for all his blind hurry of pursuit, to wait till a pottle had been fetched and a bloomy pyramid piled upon it. A gesture of impatience, a too headlong departure, would set

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the servants' hall jabbering anew. It had enough food already for its infernal gossip. He gasped at the folly, the mad folly of it, the cruel indifference to him, to his dignity, his good repute, that could let her sit there 'most evenings' so needlessly, so callously exposed to any prying servant's eye. Such blatancy was gross, grosser than the sin itself. Yet sin? And Hester? Impossible! . . . At worst it would be folly, the gentle reluctant folly of an unoccupied woman. . . . No, it was the man who was the problem. Here was some schemer, using a silly woman's sentiment for—what private end? . . . He had his enemies. He was uneasily aware that he had occasionally deserved them. Were they striking through her at him? . . . Was Isabel in it? . . . Mackail now—could it be Mackail? . . . Mackail had been at Isabel's that evening—vividly the year-old scene flashed back into his mind, more vivid in recollection than it had been in the living—that evening in which, he remembered now, it had first struck him uncomfortably that something had happened, was happening to Hester. He wished he could remember that evening more clearly. . . . What had happened? Had they quarrelled? . . . They never quarrelled. But Hester had gone into the garden late at night and then he had heard—the

truth flashed blindingly through his brain—he himself had heard, with his own ears, the rumoured and incredible voice. There was something in the story then! . . . It had been going on all this while and he had never guessed. . . . Yet Hester to be deceiving him? . . . It was not credible. . . . Besides, it couldn't be Mackail. He had left Mackail at Isabel's. . . . Then who? Who? . . .

He realized as he searched his mind for a list of their mutual acquaintances how little he knew, after all, of his Hester, of her employments, of her friendships, of her daily life. He felt vaguely that something was wrong somewhere, that he ought to know more about her. But then, what did she know of him? . . . What interest did she take in him? Did she ever ask him questions? . . . Did she ever concern herself with his business or his friends? . . . No, she went her own way, her own colourless way. . . . But if it were not so colourless after all? . . . 'She's sly, Harry. Harry, you don't know!' Hester accused, and by Isabel? That was absurd! That was—his eyes fell on the blazing summer border as he hurried down the path, gilded and purple-barred by the evening light—that was the sunflower come to judgment on the white pinks at his feet. . . .

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He drew a deep breath. The air was full of their sweet and delicate scent.

‘Harry, you could divorce her!’ . . . He could, could he? That was as he chose. . . . But the man? Isabel had been careful to go far, but not too far. She named no names—oh, he could imagine her saying it! . . . but no doubt she knew. . . . Who was the contemporary that the gardener’s unobservant glance could take for himself? Once come to grips with the man—he could deal with Hester afterwards. . . . And so arrived, the evening sun painting him scarlet as he half walked, half ran upon his way, at the cool fringes of the wood.

The trees grew far apart, slender bare stems which had straggled up between giants long since felled, to a daylight far away as beanstalk-land. The green ceiling they carried was pierced with streaming golden shafts that melted in middle air to a mellow twilight in which motes floated and the midges of the dusk danced in a maze. The path, the colour of last year’s leaves, wound among those leaves, skirting the root pits, swerving out again into open land and so on, a mere dotted double line of hawksbit, to the final clump of beeches by the stile.

There, on the low bench by the path, sat his wife—alone.

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Her hand shaded her eyes against the level sunlight and she was looking along the path towards him as if she were following the movements of someone he could not see. Then her glance encountered his and she smiled placidly, but without surprise. That astonished him most, that she was not in any way surprised. But the basket of fruit surprised her. She was as pleased as a child.

“Harry! For me? Did you bring them for me? Why, I was just saying——” She corrected herself with an odd flicker of the eyelids, “I was just thinking how thirsty I was.”

He dumped the basket on to the seat beside her with a jerk of the wrist that sent the sunset fruit that crowned it rolling along the slats to the ground. She stooped after them.

“Who were you telling? Who was with you?” he demanded.

She said, her face flushed from the exertion—

“No-one has been here but you. Why?”

“Hirst saw you,” he said, kicking at a tripping rootlet in his way. His anger had suddenly cooled into embarrassment. Face to face with his wife his own thoughts of her encumbered him. He had expected—he wasn’t sure what he had expected—but he did not expect her to enjoy her peach with-

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out so much as an answer: he did not expect her to push the basket towards him, as if inviting him to enjoy one too. Moodily he watched her finish it and lay up the others in their nest, put away her handkerchief, rise and shake out her frock.

He began again, oddly helpless—

“Hirst——”

“Poor Hirst!” she said, and with that moved leisurely forwards towards the house. He found himself moving with her, saying no more than—

“But look here, Hetty——”

“Well, Harry?” she answered, smiling, smiling at the flowers on either side of them, at the golden sky above them, at the flirting wagtail in their path, smiling at all the world save him.

“Nothing,” said he, suddenly sullen. And they walked on in silence. It was not till they reached the terrace, not till he could see through the French window the parlour-maid laying the meal, not till he caught, or imagined that he caught an inquisitive turn of the girl’s head in their direction, that his wife, half stopping, turned her face to him and, still smiling, spoke—

“There was no-one there but you, Harry. Who else should there be?”

She waited as if for an answer. But at this stage, he told himself, what could he answer?

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He made a brusque gesture, as one abandoning the matter, and would have passed on. But at that she caught him by the arm, half turning him so that he must needs face her, and repeated with a full-eyed, steady look at him and no smile left—

“Harry! Who should there be?”

For a moment their eyes held each other upon that word. Then she released him, and as if by mutual agreement, they went on together into the house.

On the tray among the dusty cards on the hall table—he noticed with fresh uneasiness that it was a long time since Hester had had callers—lay a letter with a week-old stamp, a letter in a handwriting which he knew. He caught it up furtively with a glance at his wife. Before her back had disappeared round the curve of the landing he had read it: before the gong had rung a second time, had sat down at his private desk, written three lines on a sheet of notepaper, signed a cheque, sealed and stamped an envelope, and despatched a startled maid to the post. Mr. Peile out of humour was not pleasant to serve. So much for Isabel. . . . So much for Isabel!

But though he could wipe Isabel from his mind as easily as he could wipe mud from his boots, as easily as he could tear a leaf from his cheque-book,

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he could not wipe from his mind her letter. All through the hot August weeks he brooded, watching his wife in all her comings and goings, matching her against its phrases. Curiously, their very grossness eased him. Impossible that that quiet face should ever have been the model for the portrait Isabel had drawn! But he was none the less disturbed. He moved in a mystery and he did not like it. He felt as if he had been in an accident: he was shaken, bewildered, bruised. He had no peace away from his home, yet in it—what peace had he? He wished he had never seen Isabel. . . . He wished his wife would talk to him. . . .

But summer had melted into autumn and they were once more using the smoking-room with its roaring chimney and deep chairs, before he got his wish.

Dinner was over and he was sitting by the fire, his paper in his hand, but his jealous eye on the movements of his wife. The clock had struck nine. She always went away upon the stroke. . . . Stop her? Why should he stop her? She was a free agent. But to-night as she passed his chair she stopped of her own accord.

“What’s the matter, Harry?” she said.

He lifted his heavy eyes and shrugged his shoulders without speaking. She hesitated. Inside

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herself she was saying—‘ I’ve given him his dinner. He’s got his paper; he’s got his whisky and water; he’s got his cigars. I’m free to go. Ah, and Harry’s waiting for me!’ And thrilled to the picture in her mind of her quiet room, and Harry waiting for her in the starlight. Yet she made no movement. She remained staring down at him uneasily—

“ Harry, are you worried?” she ventured again.

“ Not at all!” he told her defiantly, but his lip quivered like an angry child’s.

An extraordinary impulse took her. She came quite close to him and leaned over the back of his chair, a hand on either shoulder.

“ What is it, my dear?” she said again. But to herself—‘ What will he do now? Will he push me away?’

But he did not repulse her. His hands flipped nervously at his papers.

“ Is it the business?” She was slipping into a seat on the arm of his chair.

“ Partly.”

“ Are we spending too much? I could cut down——”

“ It’s not that. D’you want money? Because I can let you have——”

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"I don't. On the contrary, I thought that you might."

He laughed shortly:

"The money's all right. You spend what you want, my girl! D'you hear? Have all you want!"

She made no answer. He glanced at her sharply. Then, with a note in his voice that moved her, so anxious was it, so unassured—

"You've had all you want, haven't you? Always? I've never stinted you, have I? Hetty, you'd say I'd been good to you?"

Still she was silent, searching for her answer amid the broken hopes, the quenched desires, the rotted flowers, the useless lumber of the past. She had weapons enough to wound him with, she thought, laid up within herself. Then a great wave of pity for him swept over her and engulfed those memories.

"It's all right, old man," she reassured him. "I'm quite happy." And then, as the remembrance of her secret bliss returned—"Oh, I'm very happy!" and so rose, restless again, wanting to be gone, to cease wasting the minutes with her heart upstairs. But his hand upon her knee pressed her back into her seat:

"You're always going off by yourself," he

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grumbled: and then, suspiciously—"What do you do all by yourself?"

A side thought, threading the main plait of her consciousness, wondered if he needed a holiday? He was thinner, too thin, though it suited him, made him, at any rate, look younger. He used to be such a hop-pole. . . . Well, she must take him away somewhere . . . the south of France . . . even Brighton for a week would be better than nothing. . . . And with that the idle wifely thought snapped off short, leaving unchequered once more the woof of pity and pain. She said, between laughter and tears, between joy of her secret kingdom and contempt for this disinherited one who might have been its king—

"I think about old times."

He said, surprising her—

"So do I, sometimes. Often lately. Hester, you remind me sometimes of——"

"Old times?" she said quietly.

"You were a pretty girl," said he, to himself more than to her.

"And you were——" She stopped herself. Amazing that memory, this late o' day, could sting her to the old delighting glow! What did the shell of him matter when she had the kernel so safe? Need the shell move her? Yet her eyes

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were smarting as she watched him get up abruptly and stare at himself in the glass over the mantel, consciously, as a schoolboy does, peering for signs of his moustache.

"Yes, I've changed," he decided, while she formed, laughter-ridden, a "No" with her lips. Harry was waiting for her in the dreamy darkness above them. . . . Harry had not changed. . . .

"D'you mind?" he asked her, still examining himself. "Do women mind? Grey hair, and little of it? Things like this?" he touched the puffed and wrinkled flesh about his eyes.

But she shook her head, saying slowly—

"If you love a man, you keep him—so young—in your heart."

His face softened. He looked at her with that momentary, that strange physical dilation and darkening of the eyes which always meant, she knew, that he was greatly moved. A third, invisible, watching the pair of them, comparing their shining glances, would have said that for an instant they resembled one another, as old lovers sometimes do.

"I'm always sure of you," said her husband at last, staring down at her: and then, as with an ugly uprush the disquiet of the last weeks, the chatter of the maids, the barbs of Isabel returned

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to him, he added with a roughness which did not hurt her, did not frighten her—"Sure of you whatever they say, damn them!" and so fell to staring at her again.

At that, if she had been innocent, as he craved to believe her, as, deep down in his puzzled heart, he did believe her, there should have been bewilderment in her face at least. Questions, indignant words, he was prepared for, meek as he knew her to be; but not for the conscious colour that flooded her till her ears, her neck, even the soft white circle at the pit of her throat, grew pink; not for the sparkle of pleasure in her eyes and her lips parted in laughter, still less was he prepared for the pat of her finger-tips on his cheek in a little stroking gesture new to him, a touch soft as a smile, tender as a kiss; less than ever for the movement that released her from his hand and sped her from the room in a quick flurry of escape.

"Hester!" he cried. But he did not follow her. He was not sufficiently sure of himself, sure of what he wanted to say or do, for that. Besides, she had flouted him. What was happening to them? *She* to laugh at him! That was ten o'clock striking. He was heavy from missing his after-dinner nap . . . not well lately . . . what with the worry, worry, worry! Had she laughed at him? What was she

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doing upstairs? . . . ' My dear boy, she's got a lover! ' Crude — crude — worthy of Isabel! Worthy, he thought, with a bitter shiver of disgust, of him and Isabel! . . . Yet that blush of hers— what did it mean? And how far it took him back. . . . Old times indeed! . . . A lover—a lover! His delicate wife with a lover! . . . The phrase shocked him, and the thought. ' And every night, mark you! Regular as clockwork! I don't hold with such goings-on! ' The words, the gestures, the snickering laughs, hummed in his mind like a brood of blow-flies. Irresolutely he opened the door and stood looking up the staircase. All was silent. All dark. There was no light under his wife's door, their door. What was she doing up there in the dark? . . . A middle-aged Juliet on a Chislehurst balcony? Well, it was easy to find out. . . . Key-holes, eh? No! . . . He had his faults, he told himself, but for that he was not ready. And so turned back into the room, angry, unhappy, fighting with himself, calling himself alternately a fool to submit, a brute to suspect; but always recurring to the entirely absurd idea that it would be a comfort, if it were not so impossible, to call Hetty down to him and talk the whole miserable matter out. . . . Surely, if they talked to each other, they could find a way

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out from the trouble, whatever it was. . . . But Hester would never talk to him, he reflected resentfully. Always a dumb devil when you went against her, even in the old days, the first days. . . . Ah, the first days, the summer days! . . .

His mind began to run backwards jerkily along that track, rusty with disuse. He remembered such odd trifles. He remembered, for instance, much more clearly than he remembered his wedding-day, buying her a bunch of flowers—white lilac, wasn't it?—all because the seller's face had reminded him of Hetty. Drooping flowers—the woman had cheated him—but Hetty had carried them all that evening in her cool hands, and days later they were still alive, for he had come upon her trimming the stalks. . . . Funny how things came back to you from years ago. . . . Funny how it rested you to go back into yourself. . . . Good old days! . . . If anybody had told him then that he and Hester—he and Hetty. . . . Oh, it was hard, hard on a man to be at this pass after so many years. . . .

He turned his head from left to right, uneasily, like a bull shaking off flies. His throat hurt him, and his eyes were full of tears.

He would not go up to her. . . . He would not call. . . . He would not budge an inch. . . . He

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would not suspect and he would not disprove. . . . But most desperately he wanted to hear her foot on the stairs. A scene, a quarrel, anything he would accept, but he would not be left alone. . . . Surely she ought to know—surely she ought to feel how he wanted her to come.

But Hester Peile, the blessed closure of the door in her ears, Hester Peile, gliding up the staircase like a woman gliding into sleep, sweetly, leaving the dust of the day behind her, Hester Peile on her enchanted threshold, had no thought of the room she had left. She had done her duty all the evening: now her good hour had come.

“Harry!” she whispered, searching the shadows with her eyes, “Harry, I’ve got away! Harry, where are you? *Harry?*” and with that stopped, because her heart for an instant missed its beat. He was not there.

“Harry!” she cried again wildly, “Harry! For God’s sake!”

At that she thought she heard his voice, but she endured an intolerable minute, a desolating eternity of a minute, before he became visible, first as a shadow where nothing had been upon the brightness of the looking-glass, and then a solid presence where a moment earlier there had been but the shadow. It frightened her horribly, as it

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had not frightened her at their first reunion, to see him thus grow from nothing into life at her call.

"Not there? Not——? Not——?" She swayed into his arms; and yet, as if indeed she subconsciously distrusted his reality, put out a hand and steadied herself against the reality of the chair.

"You *are* here? I'm not dreaming? You're here?" she said, thinking the words, not speaking them. It was her test of his quality.

"Always!" he answered aloud, laughing.

To her amazement she found his boyish readiness to laugh away her earthbound bewilderments suddenly, and for the first time, irritating. It was as if she carried along with her something of the oppressed and heavy spirit of the man downstairs, as if on his behalf and her own she resented the wings of this creature which between them they had created, imprisoned, maltreated, and released.

"You were not there!" She was passionate, injurious, resentful. "You were not there, not waiting when I came, when I wanted you. You were not in the room."

Again he laughed at her:

"I was with you."

"I wasn't here."

"No. You were late."

"Harry wanted me," she told him with a faintest,

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furtive challenge in her voice, as if she defied him to disapprove. But he only nodded agreement.

"Yes, I wanted you." His arm had slipped about her, pulling her down to a seat on the elbow of his chair. But though she yielded, it was absently, with the thought in her mind—This has happened before! When did all this happen before? Then, as she belatedly became conscious of the meaning of his words, she shook her head—

"Not you. Harry . . . my old Harry! He wanted me—he truly did. He—something's happened to him, I think. He's changing."

"Ah?" he smiled.

"Younger," she said, only realizing the fact as she found her word for it. "More like——"

"Me?" Again the laugh that had vexed her rang out. She turned on his knee to stare at him, at him, through him, searching, proving him with wistful eyes.

"Sometimes," she said slowly, "I wish—I wish——"

"What do you wish?"

She shook her head doubtfully.

"What do you wish?"

She said uneasily, her glance wandering from him to range the well known room with its silent, intimate reminders of her married life—

THE LOVER

"Wish? I don't know."

"Sure?" said he.

Something in the voice caught her attention. Sharply she turned her head, and in the doing surprised a look which startled her, a look so familiar, so lately and pitifully espied upon another face that involuntarily her hand tightened on his sleeve as if to assure herself of his identity.

"Harry!" she whispered, "You *are* you? Sometimes I get confused."

He did not answer. More than ever his eyes, darkening and dilating, his fine eyes with never a line nor a sag to hint where life had touched him, fixed and fascinated her. She put up a finger, timidly, exploring his face as a child will.

"Well?" he said, still laughing at her. Oh, that he would but be grave for once—a man and not a boy!

She answered, touching him as if her fingers were a pencil—

"Here — I miss something. Here — there should be——"

"What?"

"Little human—wrinkles. Tired lines——"

"Do you want me to grow *old*?" he asked her.

"*I'm* old," she evaded.

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“And I’m a dream,” he told her. “Dream me as you please.”

She said, still touching him—

“Can I? Be—a little older then.” And, at that, rising irresolutely—“Harry, I can’t stay to-night. He—downstairs—he’s all alone.”

She was honest. She meant to go. But, womanly, she would have liked him to try and keep her, to protest a little as a lover should. But he said nothing. She had reached the door before she turned for a last look at him and saw him once more as she had seen him at her first entrance, fading again from man to shadow. That hurt her, though she accepted it quite naturally as part of the condition of the dream.

“Come too! Come too!” she said. But it was more wish than invitation. The last thing she expected to hear out of the darkness was his voice answering her—

“I always do.”

She laughed at that good joke as, unwillingly, she closed the door on him and stole back to the smoking-room she had so abruptly forsaken. Yet, when she found her husband still standing where she had left him, so like in his turn in pose, in darkened eyes, in strained expectant look, to the shadow upstairs who in turn had resembled him,

THE LOVER

she had for an instant the vividest impression, not merely that her lover had come upon his promise, but that he had stolen a march, that he had preceded her. She cast, absurd as she felt it to be, a glance of applause upon her husband, applause of such admirable masquerade. Her amused mouth appreciated, invited confidence; but the look she received in her turn, still so dark and defenceless, sobered her. This was reality: this was the old Harry she had left. He did not know her with a twinkle in her eyes; she was merely adding to his disquiet. She mustn't do that. He was ill and tired. He should not be any longer worried and disturbed—poor Harry, poor old Harry!

Casting about her as an actress might, for the properties that would enable her to continue the comedy (for so far had she come in the last year from the blackest night of her life that she could label their misshapen relationship comedy, not tragedy, now) she got out her patience cards and, sitting down, set them out in neat rows on the patterned table-cloth, and heard with delicate inward laughter his sigh of relief at this resumption of the normal on her part. But he did not return to his paper. He walked about the room. He adjusted the clock. He poked the fire. He came to anchor at last behind her and watched her play.

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When she laid her knave by the king it was time for him to interfere. He did so. His hand, steadying himself on her shoulder as he leaned over her, stayed there, heavy but not too heavy, pleasing her, till the patience was played out. It was full twelve before they went to bed, and though she hurried on ahead, leaving him to lock the front door and extinguish the lights, there was no shadow waiting for her on the landing, no quick movement, no whisper, no kiss. Yet, as she lay awake thinking it all over, she decided that she had had a pleasant evening, peaceful, with secret thoughts of tears and laughter dealt out among the absurd faces of the kings and queens. It couldn't have been pleasanter if Harry had been there.

III

It is well to have a business that brings you easy money and insists that pleasant trips to Paris and Berlin are part of the day's work. It is well to have friends who are good company, powerful friends, not to be offended for this same business' sake. It is well to have a team of interests and driver's hands. But the underlings who envy you never think of what you sacrifice. . . . Have you not your wife and your home as well as they? . . . Who

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cares to be called and kept away for a month on end out of telephone reach just when his wife—he and his wife—— And he hated writing letters. . . . It had always been understood between them that Hester was not to expect letters. After all, what was there to say?

Yet he wrote to her, twice, in the first week of his absence, and she knew when he reached Spain because he sent her, of all things, a white lace shawl, heavy and silken, fit for a girl, with a milliner's pink rose caught among the folds. She unwrapped it (she was not alone when she unwrapped it) between laughter and—tears of laughter? What possessed Harry? He must have chosen it himself. Nice of him, poor Harry! But—wasn't it funny?

Was it? Her companion thought it pretty, a pretty thing. He liked the rose.

"But Harry——!" And she explained why a woman of thirty-eight avoids pink roses, and what she wears instead.

Oh? He didn't know.

She stopped, struck by a whimsical idea.

"Harry! You're not hurt? You didn't choose it!"

No, no! Of course not!

"And besides, I do like it. It was sweet of Harry."

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That was all right then: she was to put it on.

And the next week came yet another letter. She was not to have a lonely Christmas after all. Harry was tired of Spain. Harry was bored with Paris. Harry was coming home.

Though he had given her the date and the trains she did not meet him at the station. But, as he told himself, he had never expected her to meet him. Look at the weather! A good foot of snow. Why should she meet him?

Yet he did not arrive unnoticed at the big entrance gates. The shriek of delight might have warmed him, if he had had ears for the welcome it implied:

“Hullo, Uncle! She said you were coming. I’ve made a snow-man down by the rubbish heap. Come and see it! Do! Now! You’ll never come out if you go in.”

He recognized his nephew—Hester’s nephew rather—and resigned himself to deserting the car and being led, as it were, in a triumphal procession of one, in search of much that he had no desire to see. A hard-wearing and unsnubbable youngster this, who followed him about on their occasional meetings with the fatal devotion of a kitten for the man who dislikes cats. Not that he disliked the child—oh, no! And Hester was fond of him.

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"So you've been keeping your aunt company, eh?" He moved his arm awkwardly without managing to dislodge the five stone odd that swung from it.

"Yes. Been here a week."

"Oh!"

"Going to-morrow."

"Oh!"

"Aunt Hester wishes I wasn't. Wishes there were two of me."

"Twins, eh?" He never knew how to talk to children.

"No, two of *me*. One to be here, you know, and one at home. She said she didn't see why not. It would be a score at Christmas. Uncle?"

"Yes."

"Shall I take you for a Christmas present? Had you better be standing or sitting down?"

"Take me?"

"Didn't you know? I've got a V.P.K. Swapped it with Ohlsen for my watch. It didn't go. I've taken thousands of photographs. Got a beauty of Hirst. Clear as clear. I'll print you one of him if you like. It's better than Aunt Hetty."

"Oh, so you photographed your aunt, did you?" He was staring out over the wide fields, enjoying the red light of the sunset on the snow. Better

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than Spain, this. . . . Nothing like your own woods and fields. . . .

"Yes, only it's not come out very well. He moved."

He recalled himself with a start.

"Who moved?"

"That gentleman. You know—the one who stays here."

He kept himself perfectly still after that one start.

"While I'm away? What is he like, Ronnie? Was he here long?"

"I d'know. Only saw him that once. Shouldn't have tried a time exposure. But they'd been sitting so still till then."

He said, in an extraordinary, strangled voice—

"Did you ask your aunt to sit?"

"Why no, Uncle! For Christmas! It's a surprise." And then as they turned into the field—
"Look, that's the snow-man! Pretty good, isn't it? Hirst helped me. I like Hirst."

He said—

"If you like to give it to me, I'll—I'll get that—
photograph—framed for you."

The child was in ecstasies:

"Will you. I'll get it. It's in the tool-shed. She said I might develop in the tool-shed. I'll

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get it now." And with that there was a scatter of snow, a whoop or two, and he was alone.

He said foolishly—

"Out of the mouths—out of the mouths——" and sat down on a fallen log, shakily, like a sick man. He realized that until that minute he had never believed, never for all his irritation and disquiet, in his innermost heart believed that there was authentic flame behind the smoke that teased him. But now, it appeared, he was to have his proof.

The small figure reappeared, breathless, important, both hands full.

"This is Hirst. Isn't he good? This is Mrs. Hirst. That's the baby. Did you know they'd got it? Oh, that's a sunset. It didn't work."

He said only—

"Show me—show me——" and got no further.

"That's Aunt Hetty by herself. It's really better than the other one, only her eyes are screwed up. Perhaps we'd better have that framed, d'you think, instead?"

He said—

"Show me the other one," and bent over the curling oblong laid in his hand as if it were a death warrant.

There sat Hester, as he had seen her three

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months ago, placidly, hands in lap, looking so pretty, looking so happy, and beside her, leaning over her—— Oh, but the thing was a fake! He turned in a black rage——

“ Who put you up to this? ”

He got no answer. The small boy stared at him open-mouthed.

“ Where did you get it? You’ve been at the albums. Who gave you leave to touch the photographs? You’ll tell me who put you up to it, or I’ll send you home.” And on that was instantly confronted with an experience outside his range, an alarmed and tearful youngster distressingly in need of a pocket-handkerchief.

“ Didn’t—— Haven’t—— Took it for a surprise.”

“ From the album in the drawing-room? ”

“ Not touched any old album.” The sobs were subsiding into a succession of plaintive hiccoughs. “ It’s Aunt Hetty. I know it isn’t very good.”

He looked at the photograph once more. Was he then mistaken? The figure had seemed to him in that first glance to be his own. Pose, outline, height—all were his own as they had been recorded in the honeymoon photograph from New York. It was in the family album still, a ludicrous relic of the age of genteel sentiment. An amazing

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accidental likeness . . . but, peering again, peering closer, a likeness and no more. . . . He had been a fool to be startled, a fool to frighten the child. . . . Why, the face was a mere smudge, the figure fogged and out of focus. It was, he could now understand, not even the pose that had deceived him, but rather the association of ideas, the effect of Hester's smile and her familiar upward glance. He said, awkwardly—

“Here—here, you know—you mustn't cry. It's all right—all right, eh?” and fumbled in his pocket for pence. How else was one to comfort a child?

Yet somehow he succeeded. Jove is not Jove without his lightnings, and much is permitted to the uncle of a heart. It was not too long before his nephew was racing down the path once more on an enterprise calculated to wipe the slate clean for good and all of the affair of the photograph.

Yes, Ronnie might ask Hirst, if he could find him, to take him to the town. Yes, a red lamp—twenty red lamps. Hirst was to put it down. A developing dish? Certainly. Anything he liked—if he would run along now and leave Uncle Harry alone. Yes, very tired. “Oh, and Ronnie, don't tell your Aunt Hester! That's it. I want to surprise her!” and so was left alone under the

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frost-bound trees to stare once more, and long, and long, at the evidence provided.

For, absurd as his first impression had been, it was none the less evidence.

It was strange to him, at that moment, how little anger he felt. It was as if all keen feeling were merged in a sense of emptiness and abstract loss. He imagined that he would feel much the same if Hester were dead. The lover—ah, there the fires began to glow again!—but he had no anger for Hester. He found himself remembering vividly a discussion in which he had once joined on the conduct of an acquaintance, a married man. Two co-respondents—yet he had taken his wife back. He, Harry Peile, had had no mercy then; but now—was it possible that he would do as much, if needs were, by Hester?

His eyes roved over the wide silent spaces of the garden. Even as he watched, the sun, darkly red against the brilliant snow, dropped behind the sky-line like a hot cinder dropping through the bottom of a grate, and, from the place of its falling, red afterlights glowed up into the apple-green and primrose of the dusk. The air was quite warm. Every few minutes a rustle and soft rush broke the numb quiet, as a bent bough was eased of its load of snow, but there was no other sound, no other

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movement. It was as if all nature were waiting, breathless, for the thaw.

But he only thought, as he sat on in the thickening lilac darkness, how strange it was that the world could be so peaceful when he was thus wretched. The pure fields, the motionless trees, the sweep of the skyline, like the flourish of a gigantic signature, the bottomless heavens fretted already with the pin-head light of worlds, all these wonders could so closely affect him, could prove to him how small he was, how lonely, without being themselves any more aware of him than a window is aware of the fly crawling on its pane. Was not that terrible? Here he was, carrying within himself a world of thought, a convulsed world of grief and perplexity and wrong, and—nobody guessed it, nobody cared! How was he to continue to cope, unaided, with such an existence? Hester—yes, it was Hester that he needed. What though he had never needed her before? He had had her there, at hand, in his home, ready. That had been to him her value, her reason for existence: he knew that now. Home? The crushed photograph slipped from his numbed fingers as he rose, and he bent stiffly to recover it. Yes, he would go home. Call it home for another night. To-night would decide

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it one way or another. No more hole and corner! He would have it out with Hester once and for all.

And so, treading heavily, shoulders bowed to the lead weight of that wrinkled toy of paper, he came down the noiseless paths to the house; and never guessed that his wife watched every step.

She was sitting at the window above him, crying softly to herself as a woman will, because love was coming to her—for all it was the love so long, so passionately desired, the answer to bent knees and a century of prayers. She listened while she watched and wept to the familiar murmur in her ears, a murmur that was fainter than it used to be, as of a voice speaking from far away, as far away as her husband's figure, a black stroke upon the universal whiteness.

"Hetty, Hetty, Hetty! Fool you are to cry! Isn't it better so?"

"Much better," she said.

"Dear—we don't lose. We gain."

"We gain," she repeated obediently; and then—"Harry, we *do* gain? You—you won't alter? You won't forget?"

Again the murmur filled her ears—

"Look at me! Look round!"

She turned with a little helpless movement of the hands, her eyes filling anew.

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"I can hardly see you. It's all shadows. *Is* it you? Come closer!"

"I'm close."

"It's all shadows," she said again; and then, with a faint, awkward laugh, as if she were ashamed of her fine phrase—"Night-time in heaven—and good-bye!"

"Has it been heaven?"

"Yes."

He said again—

"Look at me!" And then, as she sought for him like a woman half blind—"Are you satisfied? Have you seen? Do I stoop enough at last? Grey hair?"

She cried out at that, like an angry, fluttering bird—

"You shan't laugh at me! It isn't you. It's he who's grown young. Oh, I'm so proud of him—of you. He and you—mine!"

"Well then!" She had not yet robbed him of his laughter, not yet heard it upon her husband's lips. "Well, then, why must you cry?"

She said—

"Because I love you so."

"Will you to-morrow?" The shadowy hands were about her, the shadowy lips thin as breath against her cheek—"Will you? Hetty, have you

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thought? I shall see you every day. I shall wake up in the morning——”

She was brought to a smile at that.

“Silly! I’m half dressed before you wake.” And then, flushing for no reason——“It will be strange——”

“Breakfast now——”

But she stole his turn at talking.

“—— won’t be easy. Oh, Harry! To keep it up—to keep a straight face before him!” And so was won to laughter.

“Before me—me!”

“Before you, my darling!” Then, with a changing face and a voice that wavered between exaltation and terror——“What’s that? On the stairs! Harry! D’you hear it? It’s coming at last. It’s the end for us. Harry, Harry! I can’t feel you any more! *Harry!*”

But he said only——

“Wait! It’s a good end.”

“A good end!” There was a triumph in the voice that drove the panting listener without into a frenzy. How long he had stood there in the darkness, pressed against the door-jamb, listening and hating them, he did not know nor care. Listening? May not a man have freedom in his own house to go where he will? . . . They were

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not even lowered, those shameless voices: they did not even trouble to preserve the hushed conventions of guilt. The sentences were broken merely, as is the speech of friends who use words from habit and not at all from need. Yet he learned enough, he told himself, he learned from them enough.

“Good-bye—love you so—see you every day—wake in the morning——” and the soft answering laughter of the woman, his wife. “Strange—breakfast—keep it up—keep a straight face—before *him*!” And then the deeper tones, hateful, yet unaccountably familiar—“Before me—*me*!” And at that again, again, her damnable laughter.

This was the end! . . . Hetty was laughing at him with a strange man. . . . Hetty was making a mock of him to divert her lover. . . . This was Hetty lost to him indeed. Hetty lost? This was the loss of himself, of his own soul. His righteous and enormous sense of injury, his very anger drained away at that conviction of loss so that he put up his hand to his heart, as if he had been struck full in the breast. It ached with an anguish so keen that for the moment he believed that his heart was indeed bleeding, physically bleeding, from the intolerable wound that had been dealt him. Dizzily he caught at the loose handle of the

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unclosed door, and with no more ado reeled, not an avenger of honour, but a dazed, half blinded man, into the room that held his happiness, his future, the whole worth of his life to come, in pawn.

There they stood, the two who had wrecked him. Even in the darkness he could see his wife's face, so white it was, so shining, so serene. But what was the shadow that slipped from the shelter of her arms, that receded as he stumbled forward with ugly phrases on his lips?

"Caught you at last—not such a fool. You, Hetty! *You*, by God! Damn you, stand up to me!" And then—"Lights! I will see you! Lights!"

In the silence, incredibly, his wife struck a match, and, as if by a conjuring trick, the room sprang into being.

He was standing in its centre, facing the mirror on the wall some six feet away, and before it, in it, *of* it—but all happened so swiftly that which it was he could not distinguish—the shadow he had hunted faced him at last, faced him hands on heart, as one transfixed there by an arrow. Shouting, he flung himself forward and as he moved that which opposed him moved also, leapt forward, met, enveloped, passed into and possessed

THE LOVER

him, even as his murderous hands struck and scrabbled harmlessly against the chill metal of the glass.

"You! You!" he cried chokingly as he recoiled from that impact. "You!" And on the word was stricken dumb.

He was staring at his own reflection.

Then the match went out, suddenly, as if it had been dropped and trodden on.

He took no heed. He was shaking all over, with an emotion so intense that it seared out as it passed the very memory of its own passage. He was conscious only, following on a paralysis of fear, of ecstatic well-being. It was to him in that moment as if he had drunk down a great cupful of wine, wine divine and legendary, wine that fulfilled him body and soul. The faint starlight was high noon to him as he stood there, and he the centre of all the sunshine that heaven in summer-time pours down. The doubts, the torments, the mysteries, the griefs, all these dwindled and fled from him like shadows, and with them fled also the knowledge that ever they had been.

"I'm myself again!" he shouted. "That's it! I'm myself! I'm myself again!" and with that stretched out his arms, yawning mightily like a sleeper awakened, and laughed. His double in

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the glass laughed back at him. He stared at it, brows caught suddenly together.

“Myself!” he said again, his voice dropping to a whisper: and then, uncertainly—“Hetty! Where’s Hetty? Hetty, I want you!”

Close, close behind him in the darkness he heard the quick breathing of the woman he loved.

JULY—SEPTEMBER 1922

WANDERING STARS

“Clouds they are without water, carried about of winds ; trees whose fruit withereth, without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots ; raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame ; wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever.”—JUDE.

You by the ferry,
Saw you my dear?
She's away to pound linen
By Wandon Weir.

Cherries for kisses
Grow by the ferry:
She slipped, she fell, brother,
Playing bob-cherry.

Call and call again !
She'll never hear :
She's dead, she's drowned, brother,
In Wandon Weir.

Old Song.

WANDERING STARS

I

THIS is what has happened to me. To me! To a man like me! Can you see any humour in it? *She* laughs. That's why I can't sleep. Sleep? I haven't slept for a month. I assure you that I speak the truth—I haven't slept for a month. I don't mind for myself, you know, but my work is going to pieces. I haven't slept for a month. Is it fair? If I knew why it had happened to me I should sleep again, I believe; but it goes round and round and round in my head, unanswered—'Why to me? Why to me?' And then the tune changes—'When shall we three meet again?'

I don't seem to have a mind of my own any more. It's a mere rag-bag of memories, memories of myself, imitations of myself, scraps of talk in my own voice, little pictures of my own movements, myself sitting, talking, creating, wearying, succeeding, failing—no, no failing: I don't know that I ever had a failure—odd, forgotten, snap-shotted moments of forgotten selves tacked together by the threads of verses that are for ever running in

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my head, the horribly apposite quotations that I can summon—pat—to suit my case. Always could. I've always seen myself clearly. Everything I've read (and I read!) has had its value in its message to me in particular. Unless a book can persuade me that 'There, but for the grace of God, go I,' I'm bored. In the same way I'm always conscious of myself reflected in the eyes of the person with whom I talk. That's not my fault, of course. If people will reflect me rather than reveal themselves to me, is that my fault? I don't see it. I know I'm always ready to listen to other people if they give me a chance. Ready? I'm eager. And it's not only for copy's sake. I am sincerely interested in my fellow-creatures. I can't help being interested in anything so extraordinarily unlike myself as the rest of the world. I'm always ready to let 'em talk. The Lord knows I let Cairns have his head last night.

Last night, I say? And it's a month ago already. 'And when shall we three meet again?' We three—and Damaris.

It was 'we two' though, at first—in the theatre anyhow. For it was in the theatre where after so many years, I saw her again, that I met him—Cairns, I mean. We sat, we two, intimate strangers, and watched her. Of the third in our

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company, the eternally present third, I became conscious soon enough; but at least Cairns did not hurry the introduction. Says Cairns to me with that monkey-like, sorrowful malice of his—"Call him, let's call him—Robinson, eh?" But that comes later. I'll tell you about that later. Oh, there's plenty of time—I've got the night to get through somehow. I can't sleep, you know. I haven't slept for a month.

'When shall we three——?' No, it was not through Cairns' eyes that at last I saw him, if indeed, as I ask myself in the sane daytime, I have ever truly seen this monstrous twin, this shadow-self that Cairns has forced upon me. Even if at times I have discerned a something, a reflected someone glimmer ghostlike in her eyes, even then how much was mere contraction—a cat's trick in sunlight? You know—who doesn't?—the effects she gets with those blank black eyes of hers with the make-up flagrant on the lashes? Their beauty—they have beauty—is a matter of surface brilliance: they are stagnant pools with the moon on them, not lamps: they have not for a moment the beautiful suggestiveness of lamps. Nevertheless they are worth a hundred a week to her.

I write thus critically and without illusion, I suppose, because after all it was I who discovered

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her. I can say that I gave her her chance when, in those early days in a play of mine, I trusted her with a part too big, a stranger would have said, for her provincial quality. It was not one of the plays that meant much to me, you understand, or naturally I shouldn't have taken the risk; but she justified me so completely that I believe that I have always been more proud of presenting her than it to the public, and it has amused me ever since to watch her career, to be superior to the general infatuation. The public loved, it still loves, her staginess, her air of brocade; but I, then and now, saw through the perfection of the technique to the woman behind it. I, at least, was not to be red-herringed by her—I would not call it genius, I refused her that in those days—by her producer. I wouldn't join in the applause of the general. Behind their delights was the caviare. I thought I had a nose for it. In fact, after her success, though I had known her for years as a perfectly ordinary young woman, I found myself talking of her—to interviewers and so on—as if I were seventeen.

You may retort that I thereby prove that she impressed me exactly as she impressed the rest of the public. You would be wrong. Yet I admit that I was impressed. Impressed—that's the word, in its oldest sense. We were press-ganged to

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the booking-office as I was impressed there again and in spite of myself, only a month ago, by the regiments of blank-eyed posters, recruiting sergeants not to be disobeyed. Yet it is not by exploitation of a personality in the modern manner that she lures you in. It is art, art of the old school, the projection of a body and soul upon the stage a little larger than life. Art? There's not a trick of the trade that isn't at her finger-tips; and as Cairns reminiscently, with half-shut eyes, dared fling at me, she has finger-tips, velvet, cool, like all the buds of spring. Art? She's a pageant, a histrionic pageant. And yet it was not for her art's sake that I went to see her.

I've heard people complain that one must not see her too often, that, farce or tragedy—comedy she never touches nowadays—she is raw spirit, raping you as inexorably as gulped brandy into your own heaven or hell: and that the end is always indifference, the dead-drunk of exhaustion; but it was not indifference that I felt as I watched her seven years ago through that last triumphant night before I left England. Indifference? It was perplexity, discomfort, chill, in the end a shudder. My caviare had turned under my nose to stinking fish. I had the most extraordinary impression of—it's appalling of me to use the word—corruption.

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I don't speak of evil, I mean death. For all I knew it was the relic of a Catholic; but she did certainly carry a rotting thing about with her. The impression came to one now and then—a suggestion, a whiff, a sense of taint; to put it grossly, a bad smell. And then one's common sense, one's mere decency of thought towards a good woman would arise and protest itself sick. For she was a good woman, as good as gold. Anyone could see that. Besides, I knew her.

And ever since, though, as I say, it was years before I saw her again, I was haunted by her mystery, more by her mystery than by any memory of herself. I hadn't evolved a private life in those days. It was not I, George Greydon Hart, the human being, that was interested by her, but that something in me, that stirring of curiosities, that capacity for adapting to my private purpose all snap-shot, key-hole information which in my type takes the place of creative instinct, which has made me to-day George Greydon, playwright, novelist, journalist, and the writer of this that I write. You see that I understand myself. I have always been frank with myself. And therefore I recognize that, in those old days, what drew me most in the spectacle of Damaris Payne was neither her beauty nor her talent nor my own romanticism, but rather

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the conviction in me of the copy in her. 'Scoop' was the word that floated in my mind. And I admit, because a shameless honesty is the only chance for us writers of the second rank, because a Boswell-like veracity is our only acceptable substitute for the beautiful clothed truth of genius, I admit I say that when, seven years later, with my own baker's dozen of books behind me, all written in service of this same truth that eludes me, I was casting blankly about for a new plot, I jumped at the opportunity Cairns gave me that night deliberately to commit journalism, once more recognized in Damaris Payne my chance! I decided in an instant. No more creation for me, but detective work! Why not? She had no right to trail her problem over the public stage. For a night if you like—oh, for a fortnight I would condone it—but for seven years? Again the indecent whiff was in my nose and I was merciless. And at that moment, with my book written, printed, published, the success of the hour—you know how a crescendo of absurdities can sweep in an instant like coloured lights across one's mind—at that moment, with my past wiped out and a future reflecting itself in the old fashion from her blank fringed eyes, at that moment I spoke aloud and he, Cairns, till then unnoticed in the stall beside me, answered.

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"It should be 'Page' not 'Payne,' " I had said.

"Ah, *now*!" The answer came pat in his unknown voice.

I turned, annoyed. I know, of course, that I am in the habit of thinking aloud. If I am stirred in any way, I catch myself at once shaping words, phrases, conversations: smiling, frowning, and then rendering on my own lips the answering smile or sneer. I write my plays in that admittedly undignified physical fashion. That's why I daren't check the habit. It's my act of creation. The later transference of my thus-produced scene to paper is mere craft, the laborious and critical exercise of memory. Still, the trick endangers one's poise and it disconcerts me to be caught at it. Therefore I continued the conversation lest he should guess that I had not intended to begin one. I laughed.

"Exactly! It's the perfect name for her. Look at her! Isn't she *Mistress Page*, 'all gold and 'bounty'?"

"'If there be a kind woman in'—London—" he substituted,

"'—she is one,'" I capped it—"in the true 'Page fashion. There is a riotous respectability about her that attracts and torments——"

"*Falstaff*!" he finished, with a jerk of his

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shoulder towards the many-headed behind us. And then, thoughtfully—"Yes, you're right! "Page, Damaris Page! It would be the perfect "stage name for her—now."

"But 'Payne,' " I continued to muse aloud, "is "wrong. The 'n' changes its whole character. "There's a plangency, a wail, a violin note, in "Damaris Payne that's not in keeping. Look at "her! "

She was indeed a piece of pure opulence at that moment, romping largely, farce incarnate.

"Ah, now! " he repeated, while I watched her.

I forget the play—an affair of bedroom doors, out of which she, in the old beloved manner, drew more fun and less evil than any woman of our stage. Again I thought of her in *The Merry Wives*.

"Ah, now! " he repeated. His acquiescence held a world of withholden knowledge.

"Always, always! " I insisted.

But he—

"You never saw——" Here we were hushed indignantly by the bubbling pit. Presently, under cover of a roar—a flutter of those speaking hands had taken the audience more completely than usual into her good-for-nothing confidence—he boarded me afresh.

"You never saw her first night," he asserted

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" Her first? "

" Not the provinces—London. *The Lover*."

" I've seen her in *The Lover*," I evaded.

He put out a hand like a spinster's, knob-knuckled, with loose, raised purple veins. He clawed my arm.

" That was Damaris Payne, then. Then—then " she was a violin string if you like! "

" Beneath her producer's bow? " was my suggestion.

He writhed away from it. He was like a dog, pawing you till you congratulated him on his stick; but let you touch it—grrr!

" Her producers are as varied as her—range," says he.

" They explain her range? "

He was delighted.

" Ah, you realize that? But you never saw her " first night! "

I hedged. It amused me to make the little man talk, but I don't scatter confidences myself.

" Her debut? "

" I don't mean the first time she walked across " the stage," he snapped, " though that's a play in " itself. I took an evening off to see it. Lord, " I can see her now, collected as a school-marm, " gagging her manager through a missed cue!

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“ And he swearing afterwards that it damned her
“ for ever as a cold-blooded stick. No, I mean her
“ real start—the first night in London. The first
“ night in *The Lover*. Eh? You didn’t see that,
“ did you? ”

His face was thrust close to mine. He had the irritating air of being amused, of unpleasantly amusing himself with me. However, I could afford to ignore his tone. I had my own sources of amusement.

“ No,” I said carefully, “ as it happens, I didn’t.
“ I saw the third night, though, I remember.”
Again I smiled.

He lay back in his chair.

“ You missed something that first night. You’d
“ have been amused at the producer. Though
“ you’d never guess——”

I turned in my tight plush seat.

“ Then there *was* a mystery all along? I knew
“ it! ”

“ Was? ” said he with his eyes on the stage—
“ Is! ”

Then I too looked again: and as my hand clutched instinctively at the chair-rest it touched his on the same errand. For it was one of those throat-catching moments of hers when she—is it hypnotism?—blocks, blots out the action of the

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rubbish she engineers (and why haven't we built her a theatre and given her, instead of rubbish, the immortals to play to us—the Cenci—Webster's Duchess? waste! waste!) stands there, the scene roaring to its climax about her, and holds it and herself arrested. What woman she is in those strange moments, God knows! Not Damaris Payne at least, nor Damaris Page. She brings the strangest contradictory figures into my mind—' *La Source* ' tranquilly bountiful: *Helen* shamed at court by *Rousillon*: Lot's wife yearning towards her yesterday with outstretched, frozen hands: or is it not rather some angel of the Lord holding Jordan apart, the walls of water sheered up by the mere gesture of the divine, impalpable hands, while we, her audience, gape like the Israelites at the passage made plain for us to a Promised Land? Then, with a shrug and a downward gesture of those adamantine fingers, the extraordinary moment passes. The waters close and sweep on again and she finishes the crude and vulgar sentence in which, I suppose, if you timed her with a watch, she barely paused. It's a mere mannerism, of course, a trick, a stage felicity; but she leaves me quivering after it, wretchedly unhappy, like a man who has dreamed nobly and forgotten and yet knows that, back in the night, before the morning

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paper and the washing and the dressing and the breakfast gong, he dreamed.

Cairns was at my ear again with his whisper like the gnat in *Through the Looking-glass*—

“There! That’s her moment! That’s what you
“and I come for, and *Falstaff* too, though he doesn’t
“know it. Come now, what’s that moment to you?”

I was under the spell, hers not his. My eyes were on her eyes and the dream was coming back. I heard my own whisper, no louder than a thought and, maybe, it was but my own thought that I heard in that waking dream: and the answer that I thought I heard, my own thought too, the upwelling rather as ever of other folks’ second-hand thoughts in my mind, like water puddling over one’s footprints in marshy ground: and, maybe, it was but the glare of the stage, of the upheating lights, that puckered his face like a devil’s. Who knew? Who cared? Not I. I was rapt and enwrapt by my ecstasy.

“A path—” said my whispering thought—“a
“path to the edge of the world——”

“And beyond? beyond?” the voice that may have been his voice insisted upon answer.

“Promise—” cried my thought exultant—
“promise of heaven. Trees of life——”

There was laughter, the laughter of a devil. After it came words—

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“ Trees whose fruit withereth, without fruit,
“ twice dead, plucked up by the roots.”

The old sense of protest surged up in me, the old outraged assurance of her goodness.

“ That’s blasphemy! ” I muttered. “ Look at
“ her! ”

And to that—

“ Ah, look at her! ” he cried, and still he shook with laughter, the same Damaris-born laughter that rocked the entire house—“ Look at her—at
“ her eyes! ”

Amid that merriment I looked again, commanded, while from all space the clapping began clattering through the laughter like hail through rain.

“ Wells without water—” said his voice—“ to
“ whom the mist of darkness is reserved for ever.”

I wrenched myself awake.

“ Liar! ” I cried aloud, while the curtain rattled down upon that mad-house, and rose again and fell, and rose and fell again upon a tumult that was, I could then perceive, no Malfi Bedlam shrieking round its Duchess, but a respectable theatre assuring its governess of mirth that it approved of her. It was I who had been for the moment rapt away into a mad-land of—‘ darkness ’ was the word that he had used—darkness! My mind on that

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thought, like the needle of a tapped compass, swung shakily towards my neighbour again.

And then the lights went up and then I saw him clearly.

II

It was as if the last shreds of that nightmare hung cobweb-like about him. For he was that horror of horrors to me, a dwarf: one of the twisted, humped wretches whose mere wearing of human clothes degrades my manhood by hinting cousinship. It was an offence to me to have him shuffle with his feet as he pushed out beside me and, in the press, catch my arm with a too humble apology, an apology that, knowing as he must have known the power of his insolent weakness, was a veiled command. I lent him my arm, shuddering. Said he, tipping up his face to me—he had no neck—

“I am as strong as a horse with my hands.”

In proof his grip tightened. Involuntarily I tried to shake myself free, but of course in the press I was helpless. I said coldly—

“I don’t follow you.”

He answered me, nearly swung off his feet by the surging crowd—

“I was calling your attention to my quality.

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“ You have already—” his smile impeached me—
“ run your eye over my defects.”

I muttered some disgusted disclaimer. An appeal to my pity, however oblique, offends my sense of plain dealing. I have, I hope, as strong a sense of duty to my fellows as any man, but I will not be tricked through compassion into doing or even saying what is foreign to me. When I am so tricked I admit I am churlish, as now. But he was shameless.

“ We also have our vanities,” he assured me. “ My quality—” again his pressing fingers—“ is tenacity. Not only of the body.”

I said that I was in a hurry, that he must excuse me. He shot an amused look at me out of his brilliant eyes.

“ Consider me a woman—I am little more—
“ and see my weakness out of the crowd.”

I shrugged my shoulders. He had conquered me but I did not like him the better for it. He, however, was quite at his ease.

“ Damaris carries one away still, eh? ” His look accused me of enthusiasm.

It was instinct in me to defend my emotion from his eye. I yawned.

“ If I said that she sent me to sleep—” I quibbled, knowing that he watched me.

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He was not to be derailed.

"I should still believe a tribute intended," he assured me. Here the shallow steps of the entrance hall engrossed him. His caution was as pitiful as old age in a hurry: but his tongue wagged on. "Sleep gives us dreams, and dreams are the rain-drops of our hell. You don't agree? Yet you—" "talk in your sleep!"

I looked down at him with a certain nervousness. It occurred to me that I might be at a disadvantage. I am fairly well known and I have, as it were, my manner for publication. I do not care for an observant stranger to realize, as he had evidently done, that other manners can be in reserve.

I stood still. We had reached the pavement.

"What do you want?" I challenged him.

"It is a question of what you want," he retorted, his teeth glinting in the lamp-light. "If I might diagnose, you are a case of——"

"Well?"

"Coelebs in search of—copy! A hit?" for I had, I suppose, made a movement towards him that a man less secure in the consciousness of weakness would have resented.

"What the devil——?" I was beginning: then my own word pulled me up short. Conceive him as he huddled there, with his air of a touzled raven

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and the light of the arcs bleaching the blood out of him, and think, as I did, of an incubus from hell.

Said he, grinning at me—

“ We answer to our names, do we not? ”

Over my shoulder I answered him—

“ I don’t know why you have fastened yourself
“ on me, but I wish you good-night.”

Before I could stir his long arm had shot out and fastened upon my elbow like a bracelet of iron. I wrenched away indignantly, but his grip was astonishing. Without a scene it was impossible to free myself.

“ A hit? But the devil’s heaven-sent sometimes.
“ Why not sell your soul to me for—copy? You
“ write. I could tell you a story——”

I was too astonished to nurse my anger.

“ How on earth do you know that? ” I asked him. “ I don’t know you.”

He chuckled.

“ That is—or is not—in the story.”

“ The story? ”

“ —of Damaris Payne. I’ll sell it you cheap.”

At that I thought I had him.

“ When did your paper discharge you? ” I asked him.

He released my arm in order to spread deprecating fingers.

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"You mistake. The pursuit of literature is beyond me. Yet I could put a story in the right hands."

"Then there *is* a story! I knew it."

"There is. And—an added attraction—I'll throw you in my own."

I thought I saw the situation at last.

"In love with her?" said I, deliberately brutal.

I did not think, until I saw, that his face could have grown whiter or his eyes more wild.

"I love her!" he told the passers-by.

"Why then—" I underlined it—"in a man who will sell tales of the woman he loves——"

"I will sell," he said.

I ignored him.

"—jealousy follows, does it not?"

"You say so."

"And your price?" For I was not ashamed of bribing him. Tales of Damaris were safer with me than with many men. If tales of Damaris were in the air, for the sake of times ten years old, I would net them.

He stared at me.

"Your price?" I repeated impatiently.

He went off into a fit of laughter that echoed in the emptying street.

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“Your company,” he crowed: “what else?
“My God, the delight of your company!”

It was then that I wondered if he were sane. Indeed the passers-by may well have thought us a lunatic and his keeper. I am a biggish man, not otherwise too noticeable; but he, dragging at my arm like a child at its nurse, with his shadow that distorted distortion stalking monstrously before and after him, alternately dwarfed giant and giant dwarf, with his wrung smile, his suffering woman's smile waxing and waning incessantly on his deadly face as the lamps found and lost him, he was a companion of nightmare indeed.

“Quo vadis?” said he at last, and I told him that I was taking him to my rooms a stone's throw away. It is always less trouble to dispense than to receive hospitality.

“I could provide you with the implements of
“your trade if you came to mine,” said he.
“However, it's as well——”

“You're so sure that I'm a journalist?”

“A writer of sorts,” he returned indifferently.
“Probably an actor also. His profession stamps a
“man even more than a sojourn in America.”

“Correct!” I said, nettled by his acumen. “I
“have been in America for the last seven
“years.”

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“ Picking up gold and silver, obviously,” with an eye at the fur of my coat.

“ And you, on the other hand? ” I suggested.

“ I? ” said he—“ I exist beautifully. Isn’t that almost enough? Incidentally I act as agent to Miss Damaris Payne. And thereby hangs your tale, Mr. ——? ”

I did not give him the name that so often stared at me, linked with that of Damaris, on the hoardings. He had come nearer already to my identity than I cared for. I gave him my own name, Hart. I had not used it for years.

“ Managed her for long? ”

“ For the same seven years that you were in America. But I have known her all her life.”

“ Ah! ” He promised so well that I got out a pedigree brandy—I judged it worth wasting on him—and gave it him in a glass that a doge had stolen sleep from in his time. I am no collector, but I like using beautiful things. I thought to myself that I wasn’t sure whether he enhanced or violated the lines of my fine chair. It fidgeted me to watch his hand with its sharp nails clutching the polished arm-rests.

“ All her life,” he repeated. And then, “ She was eighteen when I first met her.”

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“ I thought you said ‘ all her life ’ ? ” I interrupted.

“ I meant ‘ all her life ! ’ ” he confirmed it.

“ But you say you met her first when she was “ eighteen ? ”

His eyes bored into me.

“ You watched her to-night— ” said he—
“ closely. Didn’t you guess ? ”

“ What ? ”

“ Can’t you guess what’s wrong ? ”

“ Something’s wrong,” I said—“ I knew it.
“ But what ? ”

“ Isn’t it pretty plain ? ” said he, his mad eyes fixed on me.

At that all the tales one hears began to stir in my mind: of Mary Lamb, the knife in her hand: the royal Indian, dying drunkenly in a garret: de Quincey’s woman, opium driven: Lais, selling her bed for ten thousand drachmae. Vice in a hundred forms rose horribly and settled like flies upon my thought of Damaris, and dispersed again at the gesture, the remembered gesture of her Eden-opening hands. Again she stood before me, the artist perfected, the immortal mime. Her ripe body had no flaw, and her soul——

The thought was like a door slammed in my face. I could make in my mind, I found, no picture,

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good or evil, of her soul. Excitement, curiosity, a friendly touch of concern, all mingled in my question, but it was prompted by an emotion little known to me, by a pang of actual fear. I knew that I must know, and I was afraid to know. Also, I was afraid of my fear.

“What is it?” said I.

He whispered—

“I told you to look at her eyes.”

“Her eyes?”

“‘A blank, my Lord! Patience on a monument, smiling at grief.’ Very fine, eh?”

“What is it?”

“*Twelfth Night!*” he mocked me.

“I am paying you to speak plainly,” I raged at him.

“What lies within the monument, eh? Didn’t it stink at you across the footlights?” His face began to work. “She’s dead. I saw her die. I’ve known all her life. I saw her born. I saw the spirit stealing into the body I loved. I saw the dawn. I saw the day. I saw the darkness. I see her now, a woman great with child, with a child that rots in the womb. I see her unde-livered, day by day, and week by week, and year by year. And I love her. I love her. I love her.”

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His voice was strangled in his throat. He could not stoop; but his whole misshapen body fell forward on his hands and I saw his tears dripping down his fingers.

III

I sat and listened to the tick of my clocks and waited for him to recover himself. As a human being I could not understand him: his personality was repugnant to me. I resented the hostility of his manner: his self-abandonment made me sick; but all the writer in me was alert, intrigued beyond measure. That his brain was as jerry-built as his body I did not doubt; but what capital was there not in its craziness!

A little, a very little, I resented the presence of Damaris Payne in his lucubrations. I had not seen her for years yet there is no woman, I think, whom I have in those years more heartily admired. For a time indeed, though we never had for each other any personal attraction, we were, intellectually, intimate. I remembered, as I sat watching him and thinking of her, the discriminating interest she had always taken in my work. Nor did I resent the reason. She was always an ambitious woman

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and I had written fairly successful plays. It was natural that she should regard me as a possible step in her ladder. It was to her interest to supply me with—how I envied her, how resentfully and of necessity I took from her—ideas. I have no imagination. That is my tragedy. And she knew it. Give me an idea and there's nothing I can't do with it; but the spark for my tinder must always come from without. Why else, do you suppose, did I endure the heaving presence in my room? As he said, that devil, I'd sell my soul for ideas. And she had them: they showered from her at a phrase, at a look, at the mere contact, it seemed sometimes, with my mind, like a may-tree showering petals with each swing of your hammock. I had no scruples in exploiting her. It was her wish: she made that clear. It was a perfectly fair exchange. Her notion—my expression: her outline of a situation lightning sketched to me at a chance meeting, at a junction when my company crossed hers, over supper at her lodging, lightly in the wings at rehearsal, and my return of it to her six months later, three polished acts of it, with a part to make her mouth water, the chance of her life when she should have learnt enough to take it, as she took it in the end. Yes—while it lasted it was a pleasant and profitable partnership. Indeed,

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I regretted often enough that the very completeness of its success should have ended it. We did too well by each other. It was the production of the play that she had made famous—I had never believed in it, I confess—that took me to America, and once there—who can resist his vogue? Not I! As Cairns said, picking up gold and silver is absorbing work. Her contracts might, I suppose, if she had chosen, have included a visit to New York; but she is a wise woman. With every scribbler in England ready to write plays to her dictation, why should she have troubled herself further to humour me? For I did not take even her bought help easily. I have my pride. But the more I remembered of that keen, ambitious help of hers, the less could I reconcile it with the picture he had called up in my mind, a picture that paralleled curiously, nevertheless, the impression that her stage personality, as different from her daily self as a passion flower from a creeping-jenny, had always made upon me. Contemptuously I rejected in advance any further theory of her that his erotic frenzy might propound. Nevertheless he had already so bewildered and intrigued me that I was impatient for him to reveal himself further.

He lifted his bulk at last with difficult care into a straighter attitude.

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“ In execrable taste, eh? ” his high voice mimicked my deeper one—“ but as I said to you “ before ” (the bitterness of his deprecation stung) “ consider me a woman, for the portion of a “ woman is mine. Well? Your conclusion, oh “ student of the human heart for publishing purposes? You’ve been pondering deeply this ten “ minutes.”

“ My recollection of Miss Payne does not tally “ with your——”

“ Variations in the minor? Probably not. But “ how useful to have two points of view! You too “ knew her then—personally? ”

“ At one time.”

“ I welcome a collaborator. Our story will run “ at the double. When do *you* begin? ”

“ At twenty. She was twenty when I met her.”

“ Ah! I pick her up earlier. Did you perchance “ solve my riddle in the *entr’acte* just now? ”

“ Get on! ” I said roughly.

“ The answer lies in the title—‘ A birth and “ death! ’ ”

“ Not catchy enough,” said I, falling into his humour.

“ Not? Oh, I call it suggestive. It might be “ anything that begins and ends—a life, a talent, “ a passion, a career, a body or a soul.” He drew

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close to me. He stood innocently at my knee like a hideous child, searching my face with his reddened eyes. "What is a soul?" said he. "Do you know?"

I hesitated.

"Life—" I said—"soul—it's all one."

"Is it? What is the wind? Air—it's all one! Yet there comes a day, an over-ripe, heat-burdened summer day and we say 'How close the air is! Why, the wind has died!'" He moistened his dry lips. "There are places—there are bodies, straight bodies—there are minds, strong minds—through which the wind does not blow. Wells without water, wandering stars!"

"God help them!" I said in spite of myself.

"God help them!" he echoed, with the strangest look at me.

There fell on us a silence that was like the hard cold light of the electric reading lamp with its green shade. Then—

"I have known two such in my own life," he said. "She was one."

Heaven knows why I should have been so angry, but I could feel the stab of rage in my lips.

"That is untrue!" I said softly, because I was so shaken with anger.

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“ When does the soul come to the child? At
“ conception? at the fourth month? at the seventh?
“ at the moment of birth? when it first takes the
“ breast? at baptism? Thousands believe that!
“ With its first smile? with its first speech? Does
“ it come even then? What is the hard age, the
“ cruel age, the soulless age? The age of ignor-
“ ance, I tell you! the age of youth. My God,
“ when I think of my boyhood! Ever thought
“ what it means to be a cripple at school—the
“ torture—the shame? I bought my own soul
“ early, but I bought it at a price. Bought? I’m
“ paying still. One buys, you know, on the hire
“ system, acquires it year by year, by payment,
“ by payment, by payment to the eternal Jew.
“ Health He takes and youth, and dreams, and love,
“ and hope—all but life: trust Him to leave you
“ life! And when you have no more with which to
“ pay, then He throws your darling to the lions,
“ and when the shrieks begin, the shrieks for help,
“ He binds your hands and gags your mouth and
“ says to you—‘ Watch! ’ ”

I dislike hysteria.

“ It would seem, by your account,” said I—
“ a purchase better avoided. Let us therefore
“ congratulate Damaris Payne on her enviable
“ state.”

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He looked at me as if I were a strange new beast behind cage doors.

"Do you sneer at her?" he said wonderingly.
"Can you?"

"Because I think—" I said—"that you, with
"the best intentions, are making her ridiculous."

He winced as if I had struck him.

"Oh!" he says, shaken—"but they all know
"me. They all know what dew from heaven she's
"been to me. Does it make a woman ridiculous
"to shelter a limping dog?"

"If it barks—" I said—"too loud at her heels."

"I have limped at her heels—" said he—"for
"ten years. If I ever nosed her over with another
"cur before to-night——"

"You're insolent!" I told him.

His eyes blazed.

"And you?" he said—"what are you?"

"Have I made her the bone of contention?"

"You are out—" he retorted—"for copy."

"Then tell your tale—" I flared at him—"or
"go!" And I set down my glass too roughly.

"Snapped!" he exulted.

I looked down at the stem. It could be mended,
of course, but its value was gone. Besides, I hate
a cripple.

Said he—

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“ It hurts, doesn’t it, to see a beautiful thing
“ spoiled? Pity they’re so brittle, the beautiful
“ things! ”

In silence I cleared away the pieces.

“ Wasn’t she a beautiful thing? ” he said wistfully, watching me.

“ She is still,” said I.

“ As you noted—in the Page manner. But
“ when I knew her she was——”

“ —always handsome, I should imagine.”

“ Ah! That’s the word—handsome. The
“ beauty came later, came and went, like a blush.
“ But handsome always: handsome as a primary
“ colour, and as hard. How high-handed she was,
“ how raw! She couldn’t even manage her body.
“ It embarrassed her. Her hands were a secret
“ that she wanted to hide. She was all stammers
“ and slang and fine outbursts. Her mind bestrode
“ her tongue like a heavy-weight testing a colt.
“ She wasn’t an entity—she was chaos in a big
“ young body, a chaos of qualities that wrestled
“ and fought and tore, a question mark in quivering
“ flesh and blood. ‘ What am I? What will life
“ ‘ make me?’ But that wasn’t her notion of
“ herself. What was she going to make of life,
“ of this soft clay of life? That was the way of it.
“ Ambitions gushed out of her in spasms of

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“confidence. She was to be the greatest writer, the greatest painter, the greatest actress in the world—it was only a question of which goal.”

“This isn’t Damaris Payne,” I said; for I—how curious are the tricks of memory!—saw suddenly in the dark of my mind, singly, without setting, like a white moth hovering in the dusk, her hand, her tense, unconscious hand, spoiling a rose while she talked to me, and felt the old prick of irritation at the downward drip of petals on my open book, at the inexplicable uncertainty of her voice—‘If you think I can do it? It’s a wonderful part—if you think—if you think I’m good enough?’

But he, out of his ignorance, went on—

“Isn’t it? It was—once. She was a noisy, hungry young giantess. She’d read everything. She knew nothing. And her opinions were the law of the Medes. She dispensed with God: she was amused at the devil: she swallowed the philosophers: all this at eighteen. Men—a bore. Marriage—a blasphemy. Children—she swayed between producing them as a duty to society and ignoring them as impediments to a career, and was the victim then and always of every street urchin that chose to shiver at her elbow—as I did—as I did.”

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He brooded.

"As I did," he repeated. Then, with a movement that bared his face to the light, he returned me the question I had not asked in words. "How old am I—in your eyes?" and so waited, expressionless, like—I have seen one—a woman taking a life sentence.

I considered that mask. There were lines about the mouth like the scars of a whip, and his eyes smouldered in deep grates. His cheeks had the smooth, uncanny innocence of flesh that the very old share sometimes with the very young. I shrugged my shoulders.

"Fifty? sixty?" said I, sparing him.

But again, instead of answering—

"How old are you?" he asked me. "Forty?"

I nodded.

His eyes were pitiful.

"I'm not. You're my better by the wisdom of ten years. I'm younger than she." And then, as ever, at the word, his voice, his countenance, his manner, his whole man, suffered its accustomed—change? That's too crude: there's no word for a transfiguration so impalpable; but you know how ice, with black water running under it, will—not melt—but ease the harsh of its surface in the little midday hour of an invisible sun. Thus he at

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thought or speech of her. He went on—" Even
" she doesn't know that. Not that, though I tell
" her many things, and she me. That's what I'm
" here for—a safe to hold her stores——"

(" Ah! " thought I—" and here you sit blabbing
" to a stranger—you broken safe! ")

" —an old brother that can't fend for himself.
" That's her view of me. She confides because she
" protects. It saves her pride. D'you think I'm
" not thankful for it? "

I wondered at the violence of my own distaste
as I said—

" It's unnatural."

" A bond of youth between us? Yes, that
" would be unnatural. That's why I hid it. It
" wasn't difficult to hide. How could I be any-
" thing but old to her? Come—imagine our first
" meeting! Make your picture of me in her eyes
" if ever she chanced to perceive me—I swear she
" never looked. The human poster caught her eye
" in those days. I was mere background—furni-
" ture of a room. Oh, not a room like this! I
" never had the luck of a setting like this—if it is
" luck."

We had risen. I watched him straying, as he
talked, from treasure to treasure of mine, like a cat
roaming strange quarters. It amused me to watch

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him, queer beast that he was! His unwilling appreciation of what I valued disarmed me. He was nice. My Rops he passed unwinking, but my Fantin La Tour snared him for a long moment. It's a trail of laburnum in a grey bowl—you know what his greys can be!—with the brush-work in the early manner, thin and slick. But it is the quality of the yellows that is so amazing. It's as if he used raw sunlight for his medium.

Says Cairns at last, moving—

“I love flowers,” and so turns to my books.

I daresay there are not two thousand. I'm not so rich a man. But those at least are books.

He ran a finger timidly across their backs.

“You use them? You read out of them?” he demanded.

I smiled faintly.

“I don't prop them against the coffee-pot, if you mean that. They're here when I want to read.”

“But it's their bodies you delight in,” he asserted.

“As temple of the spirit. *He* at least demands “it.” I nodded towards the volume in his hand.

“Does he?” He caressed the leather. “Is he “less Shakespeare to you from the tuppenny box?”

“A little, I confess.”

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He nodded gravely as one who confirms a theory.

"*She* learned to think as you do. She has talked to me of this room—of this sort of room, I mean—while she sat in mine."

I would not question him; but he read me. He was uncanny in his quickness.

"My room? The office of a Bloomsbury boarding-house. Don't you know such a place? A three-walled cubby with a humped ceiling where the stair curves over it, and a ground glass window, and gas that's never turned out, gas that throws a light no larger than a plate because the mantle's broken. It hisses over a desk and a swivel chair, and in the chair, swinging with it but never rising, chained down to it by the weight of two pounds weekly, is the manager's monkey. That's how she saw me first. Yet broken light is merciful to a chained monkey sometimes. When she stayed to talk to me a little after her bill was paid, establishing quite soon a daily habit of confidence in a shadow, a friendly shadow, an institution of a shadow: when she perched, foot a-swing, on the edge of my desk, so straight, so gallant under the coughing light, laughing, gossiping, glooming, lending me books, recounting adventures and indigna-

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“ tions—she had no troubles!—then, then I learnt
“ to be grateful to the broken, merciful light for
“ revealing her youth and hiding mine.”

There was no bitterness in his voice. It amazed me that there was no bitterness. In his place, I suppose, one's sensitiveness gets dulled; but if I had been he, I could not have been gentle in my thoughts to Damaris. But he was even smiling.

“ Well? ” said I, perhaps too eagerly. It was the look in his eyes that disturbed me—a look of secret delight. I know that look on a man's face, though it is oftener on a woman's. I saw it once in a child of three. I've seen it in my own mother. I dread that look on any face: it intrigues and torments me. It's the look of hidden treasure. But what treasure? Why will they never let you share? *She* had it, I remember, for all her dust-coloured ways; for I caught her once when I was discussing the terms of a contract with her—caught her flagrantly not listening, and tried to startle the secret out of her with a quick word. Useless, of course. They guard their treasures. All I could get, with the look gone, the light gone, was—

‘ Oh, I do beg your pardon! I was thinking.’

‘ Of what? ’

She said with a half laugh—

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‘ You, as it happens.’ Which was absurd. I’d just arraigned her for not attending to me. I drew a bow at a venture—

‘ You shouldn’t dream of the first night till your contract’s settled.’

She said—

‘ I wasn’t! I wasn’t!’ And proved me right by her scarlet cheeks. Dear Damaris! She was a bad actress—off the stage.

With a half smile of my own at memory of those ambitious cheeks, I challenged his smile once more—

“ Well? You were thinking of——? ”

Again the look came and went as he answered—

“ Youth—youth in Bloomsbury of a Sunday morning, stating its position while the old folk rustle off to church with the whiff of kid gloves:

“ ‘ Not an atheist: merely an agnostic. Have you read *The Riddle of the Universe*? Oh, but you ought to! Haeckel. It just *proves*——’

“ And all the while the bells across the square cry ‘ Ding-dong! Ding-dong!’ like marriage bells.

“ And then, you know, the curtain would sway—the curtain that shut off my spy-hole from the lounge—and Damaris would jump down and sling it back and confront our dragon. D’you know her? Have you had boarding-house days?”

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I laughed.

"I know her. It's always the same dragon. She's oil and vinegar. She sits in the warmest corner and snares newcomers with tit-bits about the others. She is 'dressy,' isn't that the word? elderly, afraid of age—she'll go to her grave in rusty hair. Her ornaments dangle. She is greedy at meals. Ugh! I know her!"

"Then picture her, opposing Damaris:

" 'Oh, don't move! I hope I'm not disturbing —anything? Can Mr. Cairns give me change for the plate? You'll be late for church, Miss Payne. Thank you so much! Oh, shall I pull the curtain or shall I leave it? '

"You hear her tabby-trot down the passage and Damaris, swinging round on me too loudly—

" 'Why does that hateful woman hate me so? Why are old women always catty to a girl? It's a queer thing, Mr. Cairns, you're the only person here who really likes me. And yet they won't leave me alone.' "

"Ah!" said I—"the pheasant in the fowl-run."

"But—" he dogmatized—and I found his air of specializing in Damaris could irritate me—she didn't realize that she never let them alone either. She was too young, you know, to endure loneliness. She wanted to make friends, and

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“ couldn’t understand that you make friends by
“ listening, not by talking. She prided herself too
“ on saying exactly what she thought—in a hotel
“ lounge! To be right! That was all that
“ mattered. To prove oneself *right*! Had other
“ people feelings? What are feelings? Ah, my
“ poor Damaris at eighteen! Yet there was
“ quality in her. She was a born fighter. Witness
“ the fray with the dragon! ”

“ The same dragon? ”

His chuckle was infectious.

“ The same dragon. There was, you must
“ know, a chair in the lounge, a deep roomy chair
“ in a good light, close to the fire. The dragon had
“ established a claim upon that chair: left her bag
“ in it when she went to meals: returned to it
“ while others lingered at dessert: encamped a
“ footstool in front of it: annexed a screen from the
“ hall: defended it with tongue and lorgnette
“ against all the other old ladies on the ground that
“ she had been at the hotel a month longer than
“ any of them. Yet they all paid their thirty
“ shillings a week! Do you see the situation and
“ the old ladies appealing to Damaris’ sense of
“ what’s fair? Do you hear the murmur going
“ round the tables one day?—

“ ‘ Miss Payne’s going to speak to her! ’ ”

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“ Picture Miss Payne, self-conscious and determined, getting up from lunch at the pudding stage, and the old ladies, with an ‘ Ah! ’ of appreciation, realizing the depth of Miss Payne’s strategy—and her courage. When the dragon reaches the lounge the chair is occupied by Damaris, calm, reading the paper upside down. The dragon gives battle—

“ ‘ Miss Payne, you are sitting in my chair! ’ (Oh yes, it happened. I watched it from behind my curtains.)

“ ‘ Isn’t this a hotel chair? ’ says Damaris.

“ And the dragon—

“ ‘ But I always use it.’

“ ‘ Unless it is already taken, surely? ’

“ A pause. Then says the dragon—

“ ‘ Everybody knows I use this chair.’

“ Damaris, vainly trying to recall the arguments with which she has been primed, says—

“ ‘ But surely other people may use it too? ’

“ And the dragon—

“ ‘ Do you mind letting me have it? Please! ’

“ The nice instinctive Damaris is half out of it on that word when one of the old ladies coughs, a warning cough. Damaris hardens.

“ ‘ I’m using it, I’m afraid.’

“ And the dragon—

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“ ‘ I want it.’

“ And Damaris—

“ ‘ I’m sorry!’

“ They eye each other. Then the dragon, not a dragon any more but a rather piteous old woman, says—

“ ‘ I’m much older than you. Won’t you because I ask you?’

“ And Damaris, crimsoning to her hair—

“ ‘ No!’ ”

I said—

“ I don’t know that I want to hear all this.” And then—“ Well? ”

“ Oh, that of course ended it. The dragon departed. Damaris continued in dignity for two minutes; but when the other old ladies toddled up to congratulate she fled from the chair she had won for them—to me. She always came to me: “ ‘ You saw that? You heard?’ ”

“ I said—

“ ‘ I couldn’t help hearing.’

“ I didn’t want to look at her. It hurt me to look at her, to listen to her. But I looked, of course, and listened. Her high colour had ebbed like a tide and left little flecks and patches on her cheeks. Her hands were shaking. She leant forward:

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“ ‘ Don’t use that tone to me. It wasn’t for
“ ‘ myself. Do I care a damn for the beastly chair?
“ ‘ It’s the principle. She’s an old bully to them.
“ ‘ Somebody had to teach her! And to use being
“ ‘ old as a weapon! It’s cheating. It would have
“ ‘ been weakness to give in. Wouldn’t it?
“ ‘ Wouldn’t it? ’

“ ‘ Oh, no doubt! ’ said I.

“ ‘ So—’ she said uneasily—‘ it’s nothing to
“ ‘ worry oneself over, is it? I was right? ’

“ ‘ Oh,’ I said—I had to smile—‘ don’t ask
“ ‘ me! ’

“ She turned from me passionately:

“ ‘ I loathe myself. I was a beast! ’

“ ‘ Not quite that, Damaris! ’

“ ‘ I was! I was! But I *was* right.’ And then
“ —‘ I’ll never forget it! Never! ’

“ And, you know, I think she never did.”

He paused. If he expected comments I disappointed him.

“ Well? ” he said at last.

“ It’s for you to point your moral,” I explained.

He answered nothing. His bright eyes lay in wait.

“ This Damaris of yours doesn’t attract me, you
“ know,” I egged him on.

He scuttled like a spider to his advantage—

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“ Did any—any later Damaris? ”

“ It’s your story, not mine,” I reminded him.

“ Sure? ” he said, and I felt myself shy like a horse at a—what? That’s just what the horse doesn’t know.

“ I’ll have that explained, please! ” I said hotly and foolishly. I saw how foolishly as soon as I spoke, for his answer was so reasonable—

“ Everyone she met on the stage is in the story, “ naturally. Didn’t you say you’d met her? ” And while I wondered, ‘ Did I? Did I tell him ‘ that? Yes, I must have! ’ he continued—“ Yes, “ she announced one day that she was going on the “ stage—she, who could no more comprehend, “ assume another’s soul——”

I broke in—

“ Are we talking of the same woman? I think “ of the greatest actress I ever saw in my life——”

“ And I,” he said—“ think of an angry child “ reporting herself to me at the end of her first “ tour—

“ ‘ And he actually said—what do you think “ ‘ Maginnis said—?’ ”

He broke off—

“ Know Maginnis? ”

“ I ought to.”

I did not tell him why; and he (he was amazingly

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incurious) did not ask, only proceeded to inform me of things that I knew so much better than he.

"He part owned *The Lover*. Made a fortune out of it; or rather, Damaris made one for him."

"The wretched author—?" I hinted, choking back my amusement.

"Oh, did his share and got his share. He didn't grumble, Mr.—er—Hart. Didn't you say Hart? But Maginnis wasn't a west-end manager in those days. He was running a holiday fit-up and engaged Damaris for heavies. Two pounds a week. He took her on her eyes and her figure, of course——"

"And even then there must have been the voice!"

"Ah, but she didn't realize that. She knew *him*—" (he was still nursing the Shakespeare)—"from cover to cover—potion scene, perfumes of Arabia, immortal longings, and all the rest of it. She used to stand on the dining-room table and die daily into the pier glass over the mantel-piece. She thought she was engaged on that. Maginnis disillusioned her pretty promptly."

"No fool, Maginnis!"

"—and she came back to me——"

"I suppose she *had* a home?" I interrupted again, though I don't know why I was irritated.

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“ ‘There was a second wife and step-sisters. She
“ ‘had been cuckooed out to type her way through
“ ‘life. She had fifty pounds a year of her own.
“ ‘We advertised ourselves as the cheapest home
“ ‘from home in London. No extras. Lights cut
“ ‘off at eleven. It suited her pocket, poor child!
“ ‘Every few months or so she returned to it—and
“ ‘to me. Oh, I appreciated your point just now,
“ ‘but I say that she returned to me—as to a haven.
“ ‘Pitiful that she should have no better haven, we’ll
“ ‘admit that; but the fact remains, she returned.’”
He repeated, moved, forgetting me—“ ‘Returned
“ ‘as spring returns—much longed for.’”

I sat in discomfort. I—yes, I was sorry for him, but other people’s feelings do jar; at least their mode of expression jars. I remember coming upon Damaris once, crying—oh, I didn’t enquire why though I diagnosed trouble with Maginnis: she always took her work too hard—and I’ve never forgotten that glimpse of her face, swollen and spoiled. It repelled me, just as it repelled me to hear Cairns talk of the spring in a voice that emotion cockneyfied.

“ ‘Spring—’” he was repeating, as if the word were a song. Then, with a chuckle—“ ‘But she
“ ‘was March, not April: a March hurricane of
“ ‘indignation. I can hear her now—

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“ ‘What do you think Mr. Maginnis said? He
“ ‘told *Juliet* (I’m understudying the *Juliet*) and
“ ‘she told me. I made her. He said—“ Miss
“ ‘ “Payne? Damaris Payne will be a Siddons
“ ‘ “when she gets her soul. At present she’s no
“ ‘ “use to me.” Now what did he mean by that?
“ ‘ And he won’t let me play *Juliet*. Yet he admits
“ ‘ I can act. So what does he mean? Soul!
“ ‘ Does he think I’m a child? A soul! It’s
“ ‘ ridiculous. Of course I’ve got a soul. It’s
“ ‘ unsettling. What does he mean? Do you
“ ‘ know what he means?’ ”

“ ‘Yes, I know,’ I told her.

“ At once she was at me—

“ ‘Then tell me! Then tell me!’

“ I said—

“ ‘It’s useless. You wouldn’t understand.’

“ And of course she didn’t listen or understand.

“ She was too much excited. She was like a brook
“ after rain:

“ ‘Have you seen *Juliet*? I mean the woman
“ ‘he’s given *Juliet* to? To begin with—oh, I
“ ‘know looks aren’t everything but——’

“ ‘Oh, you *look* the part,’ I told her.

“ She nodded:

“ ‘I know I do. I’ve learnt that. The tour
“ ‘has taught me that much.’ ”

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"Yes, she was vain," I agreed. "It spoiled her, just a little."

"Vain?" He flushed up as if himself were under accusation.

"Of course she was vain," I told him. "She couldn't come into a room without looking round for a glass. She could be heart and soul in talk with you and yet, if her collar got crushed against a cushion or her pose in her chair suddenly displeased her, you could see, *see*—ah, she was transparent: that nearly disarmed one!—the thought flicker through her mind, 'I'm at a disadvantage!' and she would readjust herself furtively though we were talking of life and death."

"That was not vanity," he decided, still flushed.

I laughed at him—

"Not? You don't know women."

"You do?"

I quibbled—

"There have been women in my life."

"There had been one woman in mine. I repeat—it was not vanity."

"What then?"

"If there had been one woman in your life, you wouldn't ask."

"Put that aside. I do ask. What was it then?"

He thrust himself at me—

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“ Why, you fool—humility! The awful
“ humility of a girl in love. What? You read us
“ and write us all, and you can’t see that? ”

“ Who was he? ” I said brusquely.

“ Who? ”

“ The man.”

“ Let’s call him—Robinson, eh? That hurts
“ no-one. But he isn’t in the story yet. A birth
“ and death, you know. This is—pre-natal. This
“ is a Damaris exclusively concerned with Art and
“ Method and Technique—all in capitals:

“ ‘ How Mr. Maginnis can give the part to such
“ ‘ a woman! She must be forty! She’s pretty,
“ ‘ of course (*Juliet* pretty!) and she can act in a
“ ‘ conventional kind of way; but she’s got no
“ ‘ brains. She’s never heard of Frank Harris!
“ ‘ And her accent! “ It was the nahtingile and
“ ‘ not the lork! ” But Mr. Maginnis raves
“ ‘ about her. And it’s quite true—the audience
“ ‘ does like her just because she gives them real
“ ‘ tears. But she doesn’t feel it, you know. Now
“ ‘ I *do*—though it’s a shocking bad play as far as
“ ‘ construction goes, isn’t it? And yet I do feel
“ ‘ the beauty of it. But I can’t make tears run
“ ‘ down my cheeks.’ ”

“ ‘ She feels something, Damaris! ’ I said.

“ She wouldn’t have it:

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“ ‘No! No! It’s mechanical. She turns on
“ ‘emotion as you turn a key in a lock.’

“ ‘That’s it,’ I said—‘but the mechanism has
“ ‘been oiled once. It’s habit, now, but she has
“ ‘known in her day, in her fashion, what Shake-
“ ‘speare knew, what the gallery knows. And the
“ ‘gallery knows that she knows. It knows that
“ ‘you don’t.’

“ ‘I’m not a fool, you know,’ she answered
“ quickly and resentfully.

“ ‘No. But you can’t make tears run down
“ ‘your cheeks.’

“ She puzzled it out:

“ ‘But I can laugh. He always gives me farce
“ ‘leads. I can make anyone laugh—in cold
“ ‘blood. Look! I’ll make *you*!’

“ And she did. I can’t tell you how. She
“ smiled at me. She stopped herself. Then a
“ dimple came back as if in spite of her. Her eyes
“ began to dance, to dance, and suddenly she went
“ off into peal upon mischievous peal, light
“ chuckling notes, like a brook, like a bird, like
“ a child. I had to laugh.”

“ I know,” I said. “I’ve heard her do it.
“ It’s infectious.”

“ It’s exquisite art. I told her so when she let
“ me stop.

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“ ‘ Yes,’ she said—‘ I can do that with you.
“ ‘ Don’t I do it well? I taught myself—with my
“ ‘ head. And that’s the way I’d take tragedy if
“ ‘ Maginnis would only let me—with my head.
“ ‘ But tears! Have I got to be a dripping mop-
“ ‘ ping jelly before people will believe in me?
“ ‘ Do you think *Juliet* slobbered? Soul! I hate
“ ‘ this talk about souls. It doesn’t dawn on these
“ ‘ —these jelly-fish—that there’s such a thing as
“ ‘ control.’ ”

“ I shrugged my shoulders—

“ ‘ It’s easy to control an emptiness, Damaris! ’

“ That hurt her; though God knows I didn’t
“ mean it to. I was only trying to help her. But
“ she went away, saying—

“ ‘ I didn’t think you’d sneer at me! ’ and left
“ me—happy, do you suppose? Control! ”

He stopped, staring at me, through me, with
lips pressed together. I said nothing. Presently
he went on—

“ A clock struck bed-time. I did not get up,
“ but I reached out an arm and pulled the by-pass
“ of the gas. Exquisite, that slide into darkness,
“ isn’t it? the first minute of it, the pure minute
“ before the thoughts return like flies to a beast’s
“ nostril? And they returned, be sure! but accom-
“ panied, captained by a footstep in the passage.

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“ Then as I hauled myself to my feet the curtain
“ shook and she, she herself, came tiptoeing
“ through the dark with—

“ ‘ Jimmy, where are you? ’ She felt her way
“ into the room. Her finger-tips found me,
“ brushed my hand. She stood before me, in-
“ visible, but I felt her warmth, I felt the heart-
“ beats shake her. She said, sighing, curious,
“ ‘ Tell me, did you mean it, no soul? Tell me! ’

“ So I told her. At that she asked me, as a
“ child might—

“ ‘ Then where’ll I get one? ’

“ I warned her—

“ ‘ Don’t hurry to change.’

“ And she, panting a little, answered—

“ ‘ But I want, I want! I told God, I told Him
“ ‘ one night that He was to give me—everything:
“ ‘ love, trouble, passion, everything, even if it
“ ‘ hurts. They say it hurts. But I told Him I’d
“ ‘ got to know it all, even if it killed me. I tell
“ ‘ you I prayed.’ ”

He shivered.

“ You were right. It was her voice even then.
“ I said to her desperately, while I fumbled for the
“ light—

“ ‘ Go to bed, Damaris! It’s late. And you
“ ‘ don’t believe in God.’

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“ She answered me out of the darkness, wondering at herself—

“ ‘ The night was full of stars. I—I chanced
“ ‘ Him.’ ”

IV

He smiled at me, rounding off his story like a paid professional at a dinner, and I got up abruptly and walked over to the fire. I was cold all down my back. A shut mouth you expect from anyone, a shut mouth is easy to keep steady; but to see those poor parted lips fluttering their courage at me like a moth quivering its stumps amid the candle drips and used matches—ugh! I didn't want to look at him.

“ Women can be cruel,” I said. I had to say something. But I thought to myself that I would not stand what he had stood from any woman alive. There's a way to treat women—take or leave—they know it well enough. I don't understand these Calvaries.

I heard his quiet answer—

“ Yes, she was cruel. She didn't know any
“ better. How should she? But wait a year!
“ It was—‘ Men can be cruel! ’ in a year.”

WANDERING STARS

"What happened?" I turned where I stood.

"I told you. She procured herself a soul, at a price."

"The usual price?" I supposed.

"What do you call 'the usual price'?"

I fiddled with my pencil:

"I don't insist on it, but she was on the stage—"

"You can shut your notebook," said he, watching the hovering point as if it were the hypnotic centre of his vision. "There are pure hearts in the world. Price? She loved and suffered, my friend, and in the end she died of it."

"Men have died from time to time and worms have eaten them," I quoted.

"Worms have eaten them," said he after me.

"But not for love."

"Ah!" says he—"but she was a woman. And so, against all the rules, she died of it."

"Oh, folly!"

"Died of it, I say. But it wasn't intrigue. No taxis o' nights. No dirty claspings and contrived adventures, none of that. She fell in love like a milkmaid. Life—love—it came on her like a wind, like the wind in the cherries that grow by Wandon Lake. Why do you stare at

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“ me? Don’t you know Wandon? How does the
“ rhyme go?—

Cherries for kisses
Grow by the ferry,
She slipped, she fell, brother,
Playing bob-cherry !

“ I never saw Wandon, I thank the God that
“ spared me; but she has told me tales of Wandon
“ Lake. Life shook her, I say, and she fell, fell
“ as a petal falls on dark waters and so lay a moment
“ ere the current took her on the waters’ breast.”

“ Wandon? ” I said. For Wandon was my
home. Why, I myself had taken her there when
the company was playing at Wandon Market, ten
miles away. All she knew of Wandon she knew
through me. I told him so. I said—“ All she
“ knew of Wandon she knew through me. She
“ was there once with me, but only once—a
“ summer day—years ago.”

“ She has been there since,” he said. And then,
as I stared—

“ ‘ The lake was like a forget-me-not, like the
“ ‘ blue in a child’s paint-box. And the rushes are
“ ‘ bleached and ring it round like a gold frame.
“ ‘ The waves are so high that one can’t launch the
“ ‘ old tub. Oh, you should hear the wind chitter

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“ ‘in the trees! It looked as if it could never be
“ ‘spring again.’ ”

“ Did she say that? Who took her there in mid-
“ winter then? ” For I was disgusted that she
should have trysted with a stranger in my woods.
I had treasured, now I came to consider it, that
wasted day of ours together. Not all wasted either;
for she was right when she said to me once that I
was one of those men who bought their work with
their idleness. She quoted Sheridan. She always
wanted me to write a play on Sheridan—saw her-
self as the beautiful Miss Linley, I fancy. Folly,
of course! Who could she be but the Duchess?
Well, it might yet be written! I’m not so old.
Amazing how the mere recollection of her gives
one ideas! Wandon and Damaris! Why it’s
nine years ago! She wanted a bough of cherries:
I told her to pick what she pleased: she wore a
white dress: and my mother took to her. What
was I doing all that summer? I forget. But that
day stands out like one fine small ivory among
blackened masters and gross gilt frames of a
picture gallery. Wandon in cherry time! And
now she must spoil the memory with her intruded
love affair! A boat on Wandon Water! She
sculled. She always thought she could do things.
Oh, I let her. She rolled up her sleeves: big

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strong arms and her colour was magnificent. I think I went to sleep. It all flashed into my mind even as I said—

“ Who took her there in winter? ”

“ Her own feet, I think. I think she went alone.

“ Or if some shadowy man, some wraith or recollection, some ideal of a man went with her——”

“ Who? *Who?* ” I said again.

“ Ah, who? ” he tantalized me.

I said—

“ You’ve said too much to draw back. I’m safe enough. Who was it? Who was the man? ”

“ Content yourself with ‘ Robinson ’ as I do. What does his name matter? I can get no satisfaction from a name. Can I challenge a name? Can I call a name to answer? But believe me, Mr.—Hart, is it?—if ever he were more than a name to me, if ever chance gave him to me, to have here, under my hand, staring at me with uneasy eyes like yours, do you think I’d sit so still and sell my darling to him? Do you think I wouldn’t take him—I am strong in my hands—and wring such cries out of him, such agonies as would pay me for my own? Would I not? And you, Mr. Hart, you, for old friendship, you’d do your share, wouldn’t you, to the man

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“ who hurt her? I’m but half a man: I could do
“ so little: I’ve but my tongue. But you’re a
“ whole man. What couldn’t you do to the man
“ who murdered Damaris? Ah well, it’s the story
“ you want, only the story. You shall have it.
“ She met him at rehearsals—one of his plays.”

“ What play? ”

“ Does the name matter? What’s the name to
“ you? ”

“ There are not so many of us,” I muttered. “ I
“ could identify——”

“ That can come. If necessary I will help you,
“ for I’m part author as it were. What are my
“ royalties to be? Lucky that I can tell you so
“ much. If I’d not been watching that day you’d
“ lose half your story. She’d smuggled me into a
“ box, you know. She thought it amused me to
“ watch her peacocking. How she could, too, the
“ beauty! when the mood was on her! Yes, she
“ used to bring me. She was very kind to me,
“ very thoughtful in little ways. All the company
“ knew me.”

“ I never knew you,” I said.

He laughed and bowed:

“ I kept out of my betters’ way in those
“ days.”

“ And yet——” said I doubtfully—for a recollec-

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tion was sneaking out of the back-door of my mind. I was sure that I had seen him somewhere once, though the time and place escaped me. However, it was immaterial to our present acquaintanceship and I dismissed my hesitation with—"Well? "Go on! The rehearsal?"

"She had finished a scene, not very well, and "the author——"

"Robinson?"

"Call him Robinson. A man much like his "name. But she, as he talked to her—he had "drawn her aside, correcting, explaining, inciting "her, all in one—she did not see him so. It "happened, Mr. Hart, the thing you write of in "your stories, the love at sight. He had beckoned, "you know, and she had come across the stage "hurriedly, a little shy, a little awe-struck of the "great man—don't shrug: he was a great man to "her, with the life and death of her ambition in "his hands—and so they stood in the wings, "talking: he bored, she breathless, defiant if she "had dared. Then—for I watched it though I "heard no words—she said something that caught "him. You know the sort of thing——"

He had no need to tell me, I knew. She always had ideas: pearls and diamonds that sprang from her mouth whenever she opened it, like the beggar

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girl in the fairy tale: pearls and diamonds, unstrung and uncut.

“ And he bent forward to her, for the first time
“ to her as a woman, you understand, with an air,
“ with that unsmiling air of concentration that I
“ suppose attracted her. But how can I describe
“ it? He had no charm, no virtue for me. But
“ we must look with a woman’s eyes, through her
“ eyes, if we are to see him as a hero: and we must
“ have a hero for our story. Yes, he was handsome: I suppose he was handsome: she thought
“ him so, I know. Well, as I tell you, he looked
“ down at her and she lifted those eyes of hers with
“ a little smile and a questioning look: and so they
“ stood a moment staring at each other, a doubled
“ creature, the east and west of one sky, birth in
“ her eyes and a sun coming up, and in his, even in
“ his, a something not darkness, a reflection of her
“ glory, a false dawn.”

“ And then——? ”

“ And then they called to her and she turned
“ away, Mr. Hart, slowly, like a ship swinging on
“ its cable—and rehearsal went on.”

“ Afterwards? ”

“ Afterwards we walked home together. He—
“ our hero—went away before the end. It was the
“ first silent walk I’d ever had with her—hateful—

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“ with this foot of mine clappeting on the pavement, and she so strangely quiet, slowing her pace to mine. I don’t know what devil took me that day, but I said to her—

“ ‘ You’d better go on. I’m a drag on you. Why do you wait? Why don’t you run on? ’ I expected her to flare. We had our breezes, you know. But she was soft and kind that day. She said—

“ ‘ Is the foot hurting? I ought to have thought. Let’s be millionaires and have a taxi. It’s pay-day to-morrow. Won’t you? Well then, take my arm! I wish you’d take my arm.’

“ I could have screamed like a hare.”

“ But you took her arm? ”

“ Why yes, I leaned on her. She talked then. She thought I was over-tired. She wanted to ease the way. Kind heart. She said—

“ ‘ Did you like it, Jimmy? Do you think it’s a good play? Not very good, I think. I think —d’you know what I think—that play’s a pot-boiler. He can do better than that. I know he can. I think he can do almost anything.’

“ I said—

“ ‘ You talked to him? ’ And at that she was hurried and full of excuses as if their few words

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“ together were an importance and a crime. It was quite curious to hear her; but I knew nothing of a young girl in those days. I was bound to finish though. I said—

“ ‘ Did you like him, Damaris? ’

“ And she answered in an odd small voice—

“ ‘ Not much. I thought he was conceited,’ and talked of my foot again and a hundred nothings. But she flushed. I saw her. When we parted in the lounge she was still flushed. Well? ”

He waited for my comments.

But I was thinking of Damaris, facing me, pulling at her oars, with the sunset behind her and just such a crimson cheek, just such shining eyes, talking, and—

“ It was part of her equipment, that blush,” I told him—“ like her gestures and her laugh. She behaved so with everyone. Scent of a flower! She was not responsible. She was born with it.”

He would not listen.

“ Never! Never! She never had it before that day. He taught her that look, so eager, so willing, so sweet, just as he taught her in time those other inhuman looks. She fell in love that day as *Juliet* did, or any other most unhappy lady. I saw her soul born, I tell you! ”

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“Trick!” I repeated. “Trick! Trick! Trick!
“Why, she has looked at me like that a hundred
“times.”

V

Even then, had he chosen, he could have spared me much. If upon the eyes of my soul the cataracts had formed—and shall I, do I deny it?—yet I had still an angle of vision remaining, and his look, his laugh, his answer checked upon the curled lip, all these I saw, all these disquieted me. A frank word from him then—but no, that was never his plan! ‘Will you walk into my parlour?’ And I walked in. That’s the prick of recollection that rouses me again, again, again, out of the stupor that falls upon me now and then when my spirit dozes as Ixion dozes and dreams of his divine phantom with the soulless eyes, and is pricked awake again by the lesser torment, the mere sparks that fall upon him from his fiery whirling wheel. Prick! Prick! and again I am stung to waking life by the thought of how the dwarf tricked me, how he mocked and played with me all that night while I, God help me, I pitied him!

“And after that,” he went on harmlessly, a pony trotting in to market with marketable wares

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—"after that I didn't see her for a year. Now a
"year's a long time. You know how a child goes
"away for a term and comes back years older, each
"term so much further away from you."

"You—and children?" I did not say it:
I swear I did not say it in words. But he answered
nevertheless—

"I watch 'em, the small kids. A family lived
"at the boarding-house. That was before Damaris
"came—the child Damaris. But after that
"rehearsal it was no longer the child. Each time
"she came back from tour she was changed. Tour
"after tour, and each time she was a new, an older
"Damaris, a Damaris altered in spirit, altered even
"in face, yet with enough of the child left in her
"to come and tell me what growing felt like. She
"wouldn't volunteer, you know, but she couldn't
"keep it in if I asked. It would be—

" 'Had a good time, Damaris? ' "

" 'Yes.' "

" 'Any news? ' "

" 'Oh, I don't know.' "

" 'Any news? ' "

" 'Maginnis said he was pleased with me.' "

" 'Any news? ' "

" 'Had a row with our leading lady. I won.

" 'So we don't dig together now. I've gone to live

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“ ‘with old Mrs. Birt. A trial, you know, but—
“ ‘oh, I’m sorry for old people. Jimmy, I’m
“ ‘finding it isn’t so hard, after all, to manage
“ ‘people. You’ve only got to—’ she smiled at me
“ ‘shamefacedly—‘ give up the chair.’

“ ‘Now, you know, when she talked like that I
“ ‘thought she was adorable. But I used to answer
“ ‘her as if I were very old and wise—

“ ‘ ‘Found that out, Damaris?’ ’

“ ‘And she’d say gravely, never hearing the
“ ‘laughter in my voice—

“ ‘ ‘After all, what do these little things matter?
“ ‘ ‘She’s had a fearful life, that’s what matters.
“ ‘ ‘Her husband drinks. She told me so. D’you
“ ‘ ‘know, she talks to me. Oh, it hurts me that
“ ‘ ‘people should have such—such awful trouble
“ ‘ ‘when I’m happy. Now her daughter’s married
“ ‘ ‘—apple of her eye—married three months—a
“ ‘ ‘baby coming—and, Jimmy, the man beats her!
“ ‘ ‘Think of it! And here am I so desperately
“ ‘ ‘happy! It doesn’t seem fair.’

“ ‘ ‘Any news?’ ’

“ ‘She’d look at me and blush and then, out it
“ ‘would come—

“ ‘ ‘Yes, I’ve seen him—four times. Last week
“ ‘ ‘he came to see the show. He told Maginnis—
“ ‘ ‘it isn’t conceited if I tell you, is it? It’s only

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“ ‘you!—he said to Maginnis——’ Then she
“ ‘would stop to flush again and end lamely—
“ ‘Anyway he thought I’d improved. After the
“ ‘matinee I went out with him.’

“ ‘Tea?’

“ ‘He doesn’t care about tea. Oh Jimmy, we
“ ‘walked up and down and round and round until
“ ‘I was nearly late for the evening show. I don’t
“ ‘know where we went. He told me all about his
“ ‘work. I can’t tell you, of course, because it’s
“ ‘private, but he’s got a new idea for a play—
“ ‘rather wonderful! I didn’t quite like the
“ ‘woman’s part, but—oh, Jimmy, he does listen
“ ‘to me! I told him where it was wrong. I had
“ ‘the cheek. And he listened. He did! He says
“ ‘he’ll write me a part some day if I tell him all
“ ‘about her, about the sort of woman I could play.
“ ‘I can’t play his women. I can’t understand his
“ ‘women. They aren’t like real women: they’re
“ ‘like French women. Do you know what I
“ ‘mean? This woman is in love with three men
“ ‘in her life. I told him that wasn’t possible.
“ ‘Love once—love always! Isn’t that so, Jimmy?
“ ‘But when I tried to tell him, I couldn’t. I was
“ ‘ashamed. I used such stupid words. Helpless,
“ ‘isn’t one? That made me think and think and
“ ‘—Jimmy, listen! You know I’m not a fool.

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“ ‘ I’ve got ideas. He said so himself. Well,
“ ‘ I’ve got a story coming in my head—I couldn’t
“ ‘ write it, of course—but I could act it. Do you
“ ‘ make up stories, Jimmy, that you act in your-
“ ‘ self, only you’re splendid in them and clever,
“ ‘ and everyone likes you? Well, if I—if he—if I
“ ‘ talked to him and made him keen, you know,
“ ‘ and he wrote it—I tell you the story’s in my
“ ‘ mind!—and I played it, then wouldn’t he
“ ‘ see? ’

“ ‘ See, Damaris? ’

“ ‘ See—see that—see how a woman feels, a real
“ ‘ woman? Oh, it’s difficult to put in words. The
“ ‘ trouble is that one’s always at one’s worst with
“ ‘ the people who matter. He thinks me very
“ ‘ sober, you know. I’m prim with him. It’s a
“ ‘ sort of paralysis. I’m not myself with him.
“ ‘ But if he wrote me—myself—I could be that
“ ‘ self to him then. I can let myself go on the
“ ‘ stage. And then he’d see, Jimmy, he’d see!
“ ‘ Wouldn’t he? ’

“ I said to her—

“ ‘ What do you want him to see, Damaris? ’
“ Was that brutal of me? But she was in such
“ danger, you know. To that she said—she was
“ flaming like a poppy in the sun, a shirley poppy,
“ bright and delicate, and her hands were cold

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“ when she clutched at me in her eagerness as a
“ small child clutches you at a play:

“ ‘ I want him to see that I’m not a child, that
“ ‘ I can think and work and be a—be a help: that
“ ‘ —that there’s power in me! ’

“ For her own sake it was best to laugh at her,
“ and I tried to chuckle as I said—

“ ‘ To be a great actress? Is that it, Damaris? ’

“ But she was a great actress already, as those
“ hands of hers waved the trifle away, as she said
“ with a knitted frowning brow—in *Medea*, you
“ remember? she has the look in *Medea*—

“ ‘ Acting? That’s the means to the end. I’d
“ ‘ stop acting to-morrow if——’

“ ‘ If? ’

“ ‘ If there were another way of using it,’ she
“ finished wistfully.

“ ‘ The power? ’

“ ‘ The power. And he—he doesn’t know I’ve
“ ‘ got it, and I’ve got to show him. I’ve got to! ’

“ I wish I could convey to you the passionate
“ finality with which she spoke. But there, you’ve
“ seen her act. But when I fired at her point blank
“ with—‘ Why? ’ she slipped suddenly back into
“ the schoolgirl:

“ ‘ Oh, I don’t know. I’m just talking. Did
“ ‘ you see the flowers I brought you, Jimmy? I

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“ ‘picked them at four o’clock this morning on a
“ ‘Welsh hillside and brought them all the way
“ ‘to London for you. Such a sunrise—and I
“ ‘paddled in a pool: the Blue Pool they call it.
“ ‘It’s a suicide’s pool—how can people kill them-
“ ‘selves? These things grow all round it. No,
“ ‘not buttercups, butter balls. They’re much
“ ‘duller yellow than buttercups. Look, here’s
“ ‘the dew still inside the cups.’

“ ‘Why couldn’t you sleep?’ I said. ‘Haven’t
“ ‘you been sleeping?’

“ ‘She turned round slowly, stroking herself
“ ‘down:

“ ‘I dream. You know, dreaming is as tiring
“ ‘as living. Two lives in the twenty-four hours—
“ ‘it takes it out of you! But don’t scold. I’m
“ ‘pleased. It’s making me thinner. I’ve got to
“ ‘be able to play ingenues. He won’t trust me
“ ‘with married women yet. He thinks I’m too
“ ‘inexperienced. He thinks I’m—oh, he doesn’t
“ ‘know a thing about me!’

“ ‘And with that off she’d go, and I’d watch her
“ ‘go and say to myself—‘The next time she comes
“ ‘there’ll be a ring on her finger. And the next
“ ‘time? There’ll never be a next time after that.’
“ ‘But I was wrong. She came again, and again,
“ ‘and still there was no ring. But the next time

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" I saw her act—well, she was playing her married women. Did you ever see her *Imogen* ? "

" I did," I admitted.

" And—? "

" Oh, who succeeds with *Imogen* ? But there were—touches, splashes, I might say."

" Blue sky through clouds, eh? "

But I preferred to hunt for my own simile:

" No, but I'll tell you what—the real *Imogen* shone in that immature performance like rosy flesh through a beggar's tatters." I leaned forward: his interest made me confidential: " I knew then that I could use her."

" Ah, you knew then that you could use her," said he, colourlessly.

I went on with my own thoughts:

" Of course your anecdote explains much. I had noticed how amazingly her acting had come on—my business naturally to notice! Young people are difficult enough to find with—what's the word?—nous, technique, and yet the dew of spring on 'em. But it never occurred to me to wonder why she'd improved. In love? Hm! I should have guessed, I suppose; but you know, though you seem to have been favoured, she didn't confess herself to me."

I said it with a laugh, lightly, nevertheless I was

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aware of a certain sense of injury. I'll not pretend that it was no shock to discover—if indeed Cairns was to be believed—this dark side to a moon. I'll not pretend that the mere relation did not, as its result, make me realize that Damaris had been, in some sort, a moon to me, waxing and waning, oft out of season and eclipsed, nevertheless a silvery and enlightening creature, a light among the lights of my sky. But the man in the moon was a shock. Damaris fluent? Damaris sentimental? Damaris in a green sickness for some second-rate hack, some—Cairns had hit it for once—some egregious Robinson? It was distressing. I felt it almost a personal soilure that she, so long my friend, my partner, my exchange and mart, should have amused herself, nay, according to Cairns, trapped and destroyed herself, after the common way of women, in the very months when she had meant most to me, when I had shared with her hopes, thoughts, and dreams as freely as it is in my nature to share them with any human being. I revolted at the idea that she should have thus divided herself. It was crude: yes, as Damaris—if Cairns' knowledge was indeed to be preferred to my own admittedly remote impressions—as Damaris herself was crude. I told myself that crudity was not a crime: that in her profession, indeed, it was an actual asset.

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Hence no doubt her instinctive leaning to the stage: hence, with my opposed temperament, my own comparative failure in the dramatic form. But she was certainly crude: oh, generous, too, we'll admit, generous of herself as the stage creature must be, but not as I would have my women be. For—how logically the thought followed!—if Damaris gives herself as I saw her give herself that night to thousands and in public, then it is not so wonderful that she should have gone from my sober goodwill to her—Robinsons. But with my secrets in her ears, mark! There was the offence. I began to wonder how much of mine she, so generous, had lent to this other writer, this more pliable purveyor of parts, and what she was paid? Women, I have found, generally exact payment.

I leaned to him, in confidence—

“D’you suppose she lived with him?”

He put his finger-tips together like a schoolmaster, and smiled like a schoolmaster letting the child run on—damn him for his impudence!

“You’d have made it the inevitable situation, “if you had planned her story, eh God?”

“My dear fellow,” I said—always patient with him for the tale’s sake—“you put it into my mind. “You are convincing me, and I am ready to “believe, that she grew into the artist she is because

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“ she gained the emotional experiences necessary
“ to—dung the seeds of her genius, so to speak.
“ But when I, without intending offence, define
“ those experiences in words, you are squeamish.”

Unaccountable oddity that he was, he answered quite simply—

“ I suppose I am, about her.” Then, his voice deepening, “ No, she knew no man in the flesh.
“ And the next question? ”

And at that he looked at me with that smile which did not lighten his eyes: and the simplicity was gone again. It would have been absurd to say that he intimidated me, but there was a certain strength about him, a certain suggestion of a weapon concealed that at least provoked my most attentive glance. I am too imaginative. I build too much from a trifle, I admit; but I swear to you that sometimes, through the long, ill-lit evening, it was to me as if I saw upon his person a glint, a ripple of light that might have made me cry out, were I less in control of my emotions, ‘ The man ‘ has a knife about him! ’ But being what I am, one not easily moved by any ghosts or deviltries of the spirit, I answered him naturally with—

“ The next question? Why, what happened?
“ It’s your tale.”

“ And a plain one. What happened? She had

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“a happy year, I think. Perhaps if she'd seen more of him the tale might end otherwise. But she saw him only as we see the sun in England, with dazzled eyes once in a month or so, and between those meetings she worked. There's nothing like a woman's will when she has a prize to work for. It wasn't long before she was playing leads with Maginnis: star leads at the end of a year: then a world tour, and for two years I never saw her. Then home and a talk of London—London at last! He was to write her the perfect play.”

“He?”

“Robinson.”

“Well, go on!” But I was puzzled. It was with *my* play that she had hit London in the end.

“The perfect play,” he repeated. “Her play. She was going to use him, my dear man, his brains and his wits and his—I was going to say, soul.”

“Why don't you?” I demanded irritably. I do like a straight tale.

He shook with laughter:

“How slow you are! ‘Wandering stars!’ as the epistle hath it! I told you I'd known of two. He was the other one. ‘Wells without water,’ he and Damaris. Yet not quite a pair. She filled and emptied: he never filled.”

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“ You’re very keen on your Bible,” I said, and I can’t express how he irritated me though, Lord knows, I held no brief for Robinson, whatever I felt about Damaris—“ but I read mine too, you know, and I remember how the verse goes on. “ ‘ Raging waves of the sea,’ isn’t that it? ‘ foaming “ ‘ out their own shame.’ ”

“ A hit! A palpable hit! ” He actually laughed at that. “ But why do *you* rage? I foam it out, “ mine and his and hers, but you’ve only to gather “ the wreckage as we bring it ashore to you: “ gather and—sell! ”

“ You can stop that! ” I muttered. “ I am not “ at all sure that I shall use it, any of it.”

“ Scruples? Oh, be a little shameless, like me, “ like Damaris! She had none, though she loved “ him. I tell you she was prepared to use him, “ brain and wits and ink-pot, and had been so pre- “ paring since the day she met him, I daresay. “ You know how a woman looks forward, how she “ plots out her life, years ahead, like an actress “ working up an entrance half a dozen scenes “ away. A woman will begin planning in 1910 “ for effect in 1923, and by Jove it does happen too. “ Women are fatal. They pull off their scoops as “ Fate does, by cheating. Only it isn’t cheating to “ them or to Fate either. It’s merely commandeer-

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“ing a weapon. That’s why men fear women,
“I believe. They do fear them, don’t you think—
“deep down, under the need?”

“It’s the crooked rib,” I said. “A woman’s
“not made straight, in our sense.”

He nodded:

“That’s it! So you know something of
“women!”

“Oh, I’ve run with the hare and hunted with
“the hounds in my time,” I said, amused at him.
And then—“Women are like their letters, eh?
“They write between their own lines. And if you
“can’t read invisible ink, the devil’s to pay! Even
“Damaris——”

I broke off. I had never till that day classed
Damaris among the doubling hares but—old
letters! old letters! ‘A plague on these pickled
herrings!’ With such an idle run of thoughts
in my head I rose and began fiddling at my key-
ring for the lock of my rosewood desk, one of those
compact, grandmotherly boxes that descend to one
from the Victorians, while he ran on—

“I didn’t hear her plans all at once, of course.
“She had to arrive and get accustomed to me again.
“Do you know—so little I knew her, so treacher-
“ous I was to her in my mind that sometimes in
“the white nights I wondered if she would indeed

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“ come back to me. She had a position at last
“ and a salary that was a salary; for she had
“ boasted of them both to me, naïvely, by letter. I
“ thought her new friends— But no! Back she
“ came to Bloomsbury, and to me. And ah, that
“ arrival! I can see her now presenting the
“ successful woman, the woman of her world:
“ smart clothes, bright colours, foreign cut, the
“ hall porter behind her staggering under boxes!
“ How the lounge stared! She didn’t dislike it.
“ Why should she? ‘ Some of the bloom must go,’
“ I thought as I watched her—you know I had a
“ spy hole from my cubby. Yes, I watched. She
“ tipped lavishly: the taxi driver was on the pave-
“ ment at her beck and call, and jostling him that
“ peak-faced running man who hung round the
“ hotel steps opening carriage doors on the chance
“ of a copper. I saw his face when she paid him.
“ She gave him her card— And that too is a his-
“ tory if I had time to tell it. And so in a talkative
“ rush through the hall, scattering largesse of smiles
“ and pretty looks. She remembered them all—
“ porter, waiters, lift-boy. Then comes through
“ the curtains to me, sweeping them wide, sweeping
“ them to again behind her with ‘ Well, Jimmy?’
“ She looked so—so exuberant, so enriched by
“ time and a little prosperity, stood there such a

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“bloomy, summer-coloured woman that my heart
“sank. I thought—‘I have nothing in common
“with you!’ Yes, for a minute I saw her as a
“beautiful beast, no more, and I looked her up
“and down, not moving, hating her, my poor girl!
“She saw it too. Quick! Fine as a needle! She
“stood quite still facing my verdict, the brightness
“slipping from her face as the cloak with its heavy
“furred cape slipped from her shoulders. Then
“she took off her hat with its floating laces, slowly,
“then her long fringed gloves, then the silver-
“twisted bunch of Parma violets. D’you know,
“that touched me, the way she stood there strip-
“ping off her vanities to please me. I got my
“Damaris back as she did it even before she said,
“woefully, like a baulked child, ‘Jimmy! It’s
“me!’ But it came over me at that how I’d
“missed her and she never got her welcome in
“words. But she understood, I think, better than
“she used to do and for a while we were grave and
“silent with each other. Not for a long while
“though. Soon enough she was coaxing me. It
“was—

“‘Jimmy, so much to tell you! Jimmy, ask me
“‘out to dinner!’

“That, too, was sweet of her, I thought; for
“she’d come back with money burning her pocket

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“ as money always did. Nevertheless it was I who
“ took her out to dinner, and she let me be lavish
“ too. She understood. We talked till they turned
“ us out. To talk was one of the things she had
“ learned in the two years. The jerkiness was
“ gone and the childish phrasing. She had seen
“ the world and learnt its language and could make
“ you see it and hear it with her. But she always
“ ended every glory, blues of Italy, smell of the
“ tropics, Californian coast-line, or the Taj Mahal,
“ with—

“ ‘ But it’s not a patch on England, Jimmy!
“ ‘ Oh, so glad to be home! ’

“ ‘ But now you are home, Damaris? ’

“ She didn’t answer at once. She was busy
“ drawing patterns on the table-cloth. I saw her
“ bare neck swell faintly though, as if my question
“ made her heart beat fast of a sudden. Did I say
“ she had learned to talk? I was wrong. Ten
“ years fell from her as she answered, slowly, with
“ difficulty—

“ ‘ Jimmy, d’you remember how we talked once,
“ ‘ ages ago, when I was young and foolish, about
“ ‘ a play? Well, I’ve got my story and I’m going
“ ‘ to make him write it.’ She spoke very softly
“ and she flushed to the eyes.

“ ‘ Make? ’ I said. ‘ Make? ’ It was such a

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“ new tone for her to take, you see! And at that
“ she burst out royally—

“ ‘ What do you suppose I’ve done all this for? ’
“ and her gesture included herself, her clothes, the
“ gold vanity bag beside her plate, the half-emptied
“ cocktail, the cigarettes, the scatter of tables, the
“ whole paraphernalia of artifice and expense.
“ ‘ D’you think I care for this sort of thing? Oh,
“ ‘ I saw your look this morning, at my clothes, my
“ ‘ way, me! You’re a fool, Jimmy! You think
“ ‘ all this is me. Well, it isn’t. It’s my job. It’s
“ ‘ part of being an actress. How can I act if I
“ ‘ don’t learn about life? Why else did I take the
“ ‘ tour? Acting’s two-thirds knowledge. I had
“ ‘ to learn how to make people like me. And I
“ ‘ have, Jimmy.’

“ ‘ Was it so hard, Damaris? ’ said I, looking
“ at her crimson and white. Do you remember
“ *Snow-white and the Dwarfs*? I used to think of
“ that story when I was with her and people stared:
“ ‘ White as snow, red as blood, and her hair as
“ ‘ black as ebony! ’

“ She explained to me eagerly how hard it had
“ been:

“ ‘ Him—and you too, Jimmy, yes, you too!—
“ ‘ I care about. You’re my life, you two. The
“ ‘ rest bore me—always have. But I’ve had to

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“ ‘learn not to be bored, to pretend so hard that I
“ ‘almost believe it myself. That’s real acting,
“ ‘Jimmy, learning to live one’s acting. And for
“ ‘two years I’ve lived my acting off the stage,
“ ‘with the company and the people I meet in
“ ‘hotels and trains and steamers. Big and little,
“ ‘high and low, brown and white, I’ve acted up
“ ‘to them for two solid years. I’ve tried not to
“ ‘think about myself, only about them. I’ve
“ ‘listened to them and thought with them and
“ ‘felt with them, till I’ve learned the way in to
“ ‘them. D’you know what they say? (This isn’t
“ ‘conceit, I’m just telling you—) They say I
“ ‘always understand: they say it’s amazing that
“ ‘anyone so young can understand. An old
“ ‘woman said that to me. I’d been of use to her,
“ ‘you know, but she said that it wasn’t the help,
“ ‘it was the understanding. I treasured that, not
“ ‘for praise, but because it showed I was learning.
“ ‘Jimmy, I’ve worked over my own soul as you
“ ‘work over a sick child. D’you remember what
“ ‘Maginnis said once, that I’d be no use as *Juliet*
“ ‘till I’d got a soul. I was so angry, angry and
“ ‘hurt. I couldn’t forget it. But I see now what
“ ‘he meant. Jimmy, d’you think I’ve learned?
“ ‘D’you think I’m more worth while now—as a
“ ‘woman? As an actress I know I am, but as a

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“ ‘ woman? Oh Jimmy, d’you think he’ll notice?
“ ‘ D’you think he’ll be surprised? D’you think
“ ‘ he’ll be pleased with me? ’

“ I thought he might be. Looking at her,
“ listening to her, I thought he might be. Eh?
“ What d’you think? D’you think he might be—
“ pleased with her? ”

I said—

“ I don’t know this woman.”

“ Nor did he. She didn’t talk to him so. They
“ met next day. They’d written, you know—a
“ regular correspondence. He seems to have done
“ most of the writing. She was aware of all his
“ doings. She was very proud of that fact. How
“ do I know they corresponded? Why, on that
“ first afternoon—I’d been sitting with her while
“ she unpacked—as she took out a box she lifted
“ the lid by an inch and said—‘ Look! ’ as Cornelia
“ might say, ‘ My jewels! ’ letting me see for an
“ instant a close-packed pile of envelopes that rose
“ under the lid like a jack-in-the-box, before she
“ shut it again quickly, miserly.”

“ From Robinson? ”

“ She did not volunteer. But a letter came to her
“ on the day of arrival making an appointment,
“ and I can vouch that it went into the same box.”

“ You are ready to vouch for a good deal.” I

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eyed him over, disliking him afresh. "How do you know it was an appointment with him?"

"By her face when she got it. By her face when she returned. He must have been glad to see her and shown it. She was out all day after that for weeks. With him? I didn't ask. But her face was a signboard—'This way to felicity!' 'Well,' I said to myself, 'it won't last.' And of course it didn't last."

"The liaison?"

"The brightness on her face. It dulled soon enough. Her conquering air wore off. He always had a knack of robbing her, stripping her. I hated him. In a month she was fined down, whitened. It made her look older. She continued to be out all day 'hunting for work!' Poor Damaris! Things had to be very wrong when she began to lie to me. She was with Robinson of course. She never looked into a single agent's office. Why should she? She was Maginnis' court card. Of course she was with Robinson. I think he was a man who liked to use a razor to cut his kindlings. She could type, shorthand, and, as you say, she had ideas. No doubt he found her useful."

"No doubt. But not all day," said I. For by this time I had found what I sought.

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Says Cairns, cocking his eye at me—

“What’s your cache?”

“My share of the collaboration,” I said, and tossed him a bundle. The rotten band snapped as it touched the table and the pile of opened envelopes splayed out like a straight flush flung down. Then, as his hand went out to them, I said indifferently, continuing to search—“From Damaris. I never ‘throw away notes.’” Now this wasn’t strictly true, I don’t throw away letters, but they certainly throw themselves away. I only knew where to put my hand on the records of that particular year because papers, letters, desk itself, dated from Damaris’s brief secretariat. She could do neat enough work when she chose. “She did it!” I said, with intent to astound him.

“I know,” he said. He wore his placidest look.

“You?”

“Of course. You told me you knew her. Why ‘shouldn’t she tell me so too? Oh, there’s not ‘much I don’t know of you!’”

“And what—” I said sharply—“do you mean ‘by that?’” For there was a certain stabbing and ominous note in his manner of speech that momentarily disquieted me. It was as if he disliked me, as if he, a mad little man, a warlock trapped, couldn’t help spitting pins and needles at me, out of

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reach as I was of his wizardries. It was such an idle piece of malice—‘ There’s not much I don’t know of you!’ For what little he knew of me he knew through Damaris, and Lord knows Damaris knew little enough, though she seemed to have chattered pretty freely about others than Robinson, in spite of the alleged infatuation. And I said as much. I said disgustedly—“ She seems to “ have chattered! ”

Said he—

“ Do you remember the king’s daughter who “ talked to the stove? I was the stove. A woman “ has to talk of her heart’s delight. She was very “ happy, you know, that summer. Did you never “ notice how lovely she had grown? ”

“ I did.”

“ And it never occurred to you that in that “ loveliness shall we say—Robinson—had his “ creative share? ”

I made him no answer. I was busy with my diaries. I have a drawer full. I had found the year—in a maroon cover, I remember—and had begun turning the pages:

“ She came home in June, didn’t she? ” I ran my finger down the month. Eleventh, twelfth, thirteenth—yes, it was as I had thought. She had been with me most mornings. I flung the book

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across the table at him: "Yet another contribution! Ah, you may read it: I've no secrets. You can bestow her on every Robinson in London for half her days, but for the other half she was with me."

"Now that," said he very softly, "is interesting."

I laughed aloud.

"Does it shake your faith? Are you so sure that you can read your Damaris backwards? Very harmlessly with me! And so your penny novelette falls to pieces."

"Not quite," said he, politely. "For the fact remains that she was writing a play, feeding it to the man. I tell you I know it."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Oh, if you know it you know it! I don't call you a liar. But *I* know that I was writing a play myself that summer, and I never noticed any desire on her part to collaborate. But I grant you she looked ill. I confess if she'd looked as haggard when she came home as she did in August I doubt if I'd have written a part for her. I doubt also if I'd have been at the pains at all if I'd known she was balancing my play against that of another man. I doubt also if I believe that she was, if you'll forgive me."

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He would not see the insult. He answered me quite gently with—

“She was certainly at work on a play with him. Even if the idea had dropped for a few weeks, for those first sunshiny weeks when—” He broke off to stare at me. And then—“You know, he’d been glad enough to see her.”

“Who wouldn’t?” said I, smiling at my thoughts. I’d been glad enough myself sometimes. It’s refreshing, a talk with a sensible girl, a sensible Damaris—not his Damaris, that gaudy whirlwind of a woman.

“Just so,” says he—“so we’ll allow that for a week or two the play dropped from her mind; for the first week or two when he was so glad to see her, so welcoming, so absorbent of her: and she loving him, you know——”

“I don’t know. It’s your version.”

“Ay,” says he—“my version. He welcomed her, he needed her, he used her, and—‘Isn’t that love?’ thinks Damaris, ‘Isn’t that man’s love?’ and was in bliss.” He thought a moment, hesitated, began again—“And out of it pretty quickly! For love to a woman is ‘I love you!’—the spoken words. He didn’t speak. I know that because she told me one night, vehemently laying down the law, told me that

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“ when two people understand each other there is
“ no need of saying so, and spoilt it by a weak, a
“ wistful ‘ Is there, Jimmy?’ And that same
“ evening told me also, and for the first time, the
“ story of the play they were writing, which meant
“ of course that she had picked up the idea again
“ and was feeding it to him.”

“ But what did she gain? ” I said. “ What was
“ there behind it? ”

“ An old story repeating itself! Don’t you see?
“ It was Pythonissa. Consider Sappho! Consider
“ the Sibyls! You’re a writer. Has it never been
“ worth your while to meditate on the private lives
“ of such women? What sustained such a one
“ when the communion with the godhead ceased?
“ Such a woman, when she served at the altar,
“ when she voiced the oracle, would know herself
“ free, a woman in command, one who could sway
“ souls to the absolute acceptance of her, the
“ empowered. She would take homage as a matter
“ of course. Why not? The god was in her. Now
“ such a woman, I suppose, becomes after a time
“ accustomed to the situation. Very possibly she
“ does not even dis sever the achievement of the god
“ from her own achievement. Then to such a
“ woman, with the service ended, the voice silent,
“ the doors of the temple closed, in the dusk,

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“ among the laurel trees, in the poppy-scented close
“ of June, in the poppy-coloured June of life,
“ comes love. And she, she desires to meet it,
“ not as Pythoness, but as woman. Isn't that
“ natural? What else is she when the god sleeps?
“ Now take her as a woman and what have you?
“ A creature suddenly become conscious—obvi-
“ ously that's the tragedy—that without the power
“ she is a rather helpless, rather ignorant and
“ disaccustomed piece of clay: a mere woman
“ among women, but in a sense less a woman than
“ they because—how shall I put it?—her very
“ fitness as a vehicle has stripped her. The pure
“ vase she is; but there is a taste for decoration in
“ the world. She is the naked line of breast and
“ thigh; but women nowadays wear clothes. So
“ what happens? The man, poor devil, has an eye
“ for a modest girl in a pretty tunic; but this bare,
“ heroical creature is too much for him—absurdly
“ too much for him. Tarquin declines with thanks,
“ and the Sibyl burns her books. Phaon runs
“ away (not unaccompanied) and Sappho pitches
“ herself and her inspiration over the nearest cliff.
“ What else can you expect? ”

“ You mean that such women are half-castes.
“ A wise man doesn't mate with them. Yes, I
“ see it.” I had a curious pleasure in the explana-

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tion: it was welcome to me as an excuse for—for what? I didn't know; but there are some irritating people in the world who make you feel apologetic, guilty, as if there were something wrong with you. He had that effect on me, though I shook it off angrily with—"But it's a far cry from Delphi to the Charing Cross Road! Why put Damaris among the prophets?"

"Why not? What is an actress but a vehicle?"

"Even when her god is—Robinson?"

He caught me up—

"Not her god, her desire. Don't confuse them! Her god is and was, in spite of herself, the same Ancient of the laurel groves. Pan is dead but not Apollo. You're wrong, it's not such a far cry to the Charing Cross Road. Think of Reynolds' Tragic Muse frightening the haberdasher! 'Does it wash!' or 'give me the dagger!'—it's the same accent. Think of the wine of Duse poured into that clay vessel *Magda*! Think of Damaris's moment to-night! Men and women are still possessed, I tell you, once or twice in a hundred years. The crowd still gathers and the god still speaks: and still when the lights are out and the theatre doors are shut, Pythia goes stumbling forth into daily life seeking her own—and is denied. It's the experience

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“ of all artists: the greater the power that drives
“ them, the more they are at a disadvantage off
“ their stage, the more acutely their failure as a
“ human being shames them. It’s not failure, of
“ course, but they think it is. Some of them take
“ to themselves lovers because the one love is
“ denied them: others drug or drink. Others die.
“ But, live or die, they are always unhappy. Isn’t
“ it so? ”

I said—

“ I am not of that company: but it may be so.”

“ Then why do you stare when I tell you what
“ befell Damaris? Do you doubt her art after
“ to-night? ”

I said that I did not doubt it.

“ Yet she couldn’t make a man look at her unless
“ there were footlights between them. Men, yes,
“ but not the man. And yet though she said
“ ‘ couldn’t ’ it was ‘ wouldn’t ’ really, you know.
“ She had a stubborn, damnable pride. She
“ wouldn’t stoop to the tricks of the trade where he
“ was concerned. ‘ Couldn’t ’ after all is the word
“ perhaps. The tricky sort doesn’t get chosen.
“ And so she spent her days and nights, you see,
“ between ‘ I have power! ’ and ‘ I have nothing! ’
“ Do you see her at all, the immature, bewildered
“ Pythoness? I think she suffered curious tor-

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“ ments. I remember how she talked to me once
“ of that very thing. She had been trying her
“ prentice hand at *Olivia Primrose* in stock, and the
“ audience, a good rich ‘conformable’ audience,
“ had taken her to its heart. I had come round to
“ congratulate her and found her in the stuffy little
“ star dressing-room with its brown paint scrawled
“ with names, taking off her make-up; and tired
“ and sallow enough she looked as she wiped away
“ the milk and roses, and yet without them more of
“ an actress than ever. The cream supple the face
“ oddly for a minute or two, and the eyes, smeared
“ round with eyelash black, stare at you from the
“ looking-glass like two lost souls. Any actress is
“ tragic when she’s taking off her paint. I said to
“ her—

“ ‘Go on like that for *Ophelia* and you’ll get ’em,
“ ‘my dear!’ But she took no notice: hadn’t
“ spoken to me beyond ‘Come in!’ just went on
“ with her rubbing and cleansing till her face grew
“ pretty, grew modern again. Then she began to
“ twist up her hair ruthlessly, like a laundress
“ wringing out linen. At last she said—

“ ‘Was I good?’

“ I said—

“ ‘I came round to tell you so.’

“ Then she said—

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“ ‘ Did I make ’em cry, Jimmy? ’

“ ‘ You did,’ I said.

“ ‘ Did I make you? ’ was the next question.

“ ‘ You did,’ I said, beginning to laugh at her, though it was true enough.

“ She said vehemently—

“ ‘ Don’t mock! Did I tear your heart? ’ Then, scanning me so gravely that my smile went, she said with a sort of wonder—‘ I believe I did.’ And then, bitterly, ‘ But now, in real life, in this dressing-room, I couldn’t so much as make your lip quiver. Could I, Jimmy? ’

“ I said—

“ ‘ No, Damaris!’ and left it at that. It was better that she should think so, eh? I don’t blame myself for that lie. Nor should I quote it but to show you her attitude. She wasn’t thinking of me, of course, but of him. She might as well have said straight out—‘ I can make him see me as any woman I please, but I can’t make him see me as myself and it’s killing me.’ That was the stage which their relationship must have reached and so, as I take it, when her womanhood failed her she grew desperate and—called in the god as pandar! But in innocence, that was the tragedy of it. She didn’t know what she was doing. She was terribly innocent of sin.

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“ I mean ‘terribly.’ The Pythias are always
“ terrible. They frighten their own priests. You
“ ought to write about it, you know. A fine sub-
“ ject, Sappho or Joan of Arc. Yes, she thought it
“ was all right. She thought she owned herself.
“ Fighting for her—Robinson, ‘I have power!’
“ says Damaris terribly, and uses it to woo him.
“ But the power hadn’t settled on her for that. Yet
“ it was an inspired folly, wasn’t it, this notion of
“ the play? The god did help her, to her own
“ confusion. She told the man her own story,
“ you see, in parable, left him to handle or mis-
“ handle it—he saw it as a farce!—as he chose,
“ left him quite free, once the idea had rooted,
“ because she was sure of herself, terribly sure
“ when it came to the footlights, of her power over
“ the mere written word. ‘He can’t see me!’
“ thinks Damaris: ‘I’m too close to him. But he
“ ‘shall write me, and then when I play myself to
“ ‘him, for him, then—’ The god was to help
“ her, you see, into the human arms.”

“ She may be an actress,” I said, “ but she was
“ no psychologist. Crazy scheme! ”

“ But it worked. She did make a play of it,
“ a play that’s still running: a play and a man’s
“ fortune and her own reputation in five continents.
“ There’s method in such madness. Oh, from the

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“moment she told me the outline I predicted
“success. I saw what a part it was for her: I saw
“her in it even before I realized the fatal thing she
“was doing.”

“Ah, so you didn’t realize at the time,” I said
relenting. It made him the less cold-blooded.

He said—

“I’m no psychologist either. It’s taken me
“seven years of brooding to realize the sin. For
“it was sin.” And then with a look at me—
“Wasn’t it?”

“To make copy of herself?” I shivered, think-
ing over my own past. Then I said—(for one may
sin against one’s faith, but one doesn’t deny it)
“You’re right! It’s the sin against the Holy
“Spirit.”

“The Holy Spirit of the laurels!” He sighed.
“Yes, I know. But she didn’t know. How
“could she have told me the story so glowingly, so
“freely, if she had known what she was betraying?
“I can hear her still:

“ ‘Now you’re to suppose a man, very brilliant,
“ ‘very clever—’

“ ‘A writer?’ I asked her.

“She took my meaning with a flush:

“ ‘No, no, that wouldn’t do. But an M.P. or a
“ ‘judge or something. A successful man—’

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“ ‘ Married? ’

“ ‘ Of course. That’s the story. He has
“ ‘ climbed to the top of the tree and his wife—
“ ‘ hasn’t climbed! She’s not common, you know,
“ ‘ she’s nice, but ordinary, just a woman like other
“ ‘ women. She stands under the tree and watches,
“ ‘ desperately afraid lest his foot should slip.
“ ‘ She does love him so! She thinks he’s God.
“ ‘ But he—he’s forgotten he ever loved her, for-
“ ‘ gotten the old times together when she was a
“ ‘ help. She bores him and she knows it, and that
“ ‘ makes her bore him worse. That’s how it opens,
“ ‘ with a hateful scene where he bullyrags her and
“ ‘ she gets flustered—and behaves like a fool.
“ ‘ You know how one does. Then he exits to his
“ ‘ club, to his friends and she—she’s left pretty
“ ‘ desperate. It’s been going on for years, you see,
“ ‘ and she’s at the end of her tether. Then the
“ ‘ maid comes in with a salver and on it a letter
“ ‘ addressed to him in a woman’s hand. There’s
“ ‘ the situation. She’s a gentlewoman: she’d
“ ‘ never dream of opening his letters; but she
“ ‘ takes it up and fingers it, and then suddenly it
“ ‘ breaks down in her, her soul, her decency, her
“ ‘ pride. She opens it, and then she knows every-
“ ‘ thing there is to know.’ She broke off with—
“ ‘ Jimmy, think of it! Isn’t it a dirty, shameful

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“ ‘horror to know such a thing of someone you
“ ‘love, and to know it in such a way. You can
“ ‘forgive if you’re clean; but if you aren’t clean,
“ ‘how can you forgive?’ And then, more to
“ herself than to me—‘I could act that scene.
“ ‘I could.’

“ I said—

“ ‘Why could you, Damaris?’ thinking—
“ ‘What has she been doing? What has been done
“ ‘to her?’ soiling her a little in my very anxiety
“ for her. But she said with a sort of shamed
“ innocence that moved me—

“ ‘Jealousy—I think jealousy is wicked. It kills
“ ‘your soul. It unknits you from your own spirit.
“ ‘It’s like being drowned in a sewer.’ And then,
“ painfully—‘D’you think I’ve got illusions?
“ ‘D’you think I don’t know what men—don’t
“ ‘think wrong? They can’t help it, I know that;
“ ‘but it hurts to know.’ She paused; but if there
“ was anything in his private life that she had
“ happened upon, any photograph, any mauve and
“ monogrammed note like this of their play, she
“ gave me no hint of it. All she said was, and
“ with a sigh—‘I could play that woman. She’s
“ ‘too tired, and too fond of him still, to resent
“ ‘anything he chooses to do; but sitting there
“ ‘with that dreadful scented letter in her lap,

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“ ‘ she realizes that all her life she’s been a fool.
“ ‘ She’s kept her husband in her heart like a god;
“ ‘ but in real life he’s not a god. She’s been
“ ‘ cheating herself. A man in her heart and the
“ ‘ man she’s lived with—not one man, but two.
“ ‘ She says with a dreary little laugh that she
“ ‘ supposes that she’s been unfaithful too: she’s
“ ‘ had a lover all these years as well as he. She
“ ‘ stands staring at herself, old and worn, in the
“ ‘ pier-glass and she says—“ I’m useless: I’m a
“ ‘ failure: he doesn’t love me: he has never
“ ‘ loved me. I’d better get out! ” And so goes
“ ‘ to the window to jump and be done. But as she
“ ‘ leans outward a voice calls to her by the little
“ ‘ pet name he used to use: calls “ Hetty!
“ ‘ Don’t! ” She turns then, frightened, and out
“ ‘ of the mirror, out of her own dim figure in the
“ ‘ mirror, fuming up out of her own heart,
“ ‘ spreading, covering the surface of the glass in a
“ ‘ thick mist—they can do it, you know, easily,
“ ‘ with Maginnis’s new lighting—comes a shape,
“ ‘ eyes, two hands that stretch out to her, and it’s
“ ‘ her own husband, Jimmy, the man of her heart
“ ‘ made flesh. And he kisses her. And that’s
“ ‘ the end of the first act.’ ”

“ But—but—but—” I couldn’t get my words out.

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He waited with a little smile of courtesy on his lips.

“ But—” I began again—“ this is *The Lover!* ”

“ Yes,” he said carelessly, “ that’s the play it “ turned into. Didn’t you see it? Surely you said “ you’d seen it, on the third night? ”

“ Oh, I did! I did! ” I said, still a-choke: “ Go on! ” and composed my lips to as much gravity as I could. But inwardly of course I was bubbling, bubbling with laughter and relief. For he had upset me more than I cared to admit by his reception in the first place of my quite guarded and tentative comments on the Damaris Payne whom we had watched that evening side by side. Discussion, speculation, that’s permissible; but his vehemence, his indecent stripping from his own soul and hers of all possible veils, came near to unbalancing in turn my own judgment. I admit being taken in by his protestations, being on the way to concede his claims to very special information. “ Robinson ” says he! and had come near to making Robinson live for me, a co-mortal with even a certain indirect and wire-pulling influence in the shaping, seven or eight years ago, of my own fate. A writer of plays: a lover of Damaris: a —“ Let’s call him Robinson! ” says Cairns with his omniscient sniff; and spoofs me for an hour, two hours—I glanced from the clock to the thin

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dawn leaking through the curtains—nay, till the raw third hour of the morning, with tales of his *Feather-top*, his broomstick man: would be spoofing me now were it not for his word too much, his description of the Robinsonian first act. For when he said *The Lover*, the whole crazy structure collapsed, of course, into original rag and straw, and I saw him, Cairns, for what he was: no wilful deceiver, but a poor Tom a-cold, Damaris-crazed, hugging to his bosom for comfort this *idée fixe* of her companion griefs. Can't you see how he brought it to birth in his rickety mind? Here he was, as he himself said, a lame dog at the heels of Milady, flattering himself that the flung crumbs and crusts of their semi-occasional intercourse are the bleeding heart of Damaris, snipped off to him a gobbet at a time. But do I for an instant see my cool young woman of business descending to such weakness of the sentimental flesh? Not for a ducat! But with that actress humour of hers plus her natural feminine delight in watching the male wriggle, she might well have let him think so, have purred and snuggled to his poor-pussying. Women who love a confidant would never be withheld from one by the slight fence of nothing to confess! And out of these same professional tryings-on of emotion—every actress must have such moods to

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be worth a part of my writing at least—out of such knowledge as he had of her comings and goings, out of the undenied fact of her professional intercourse with George Greydon, the author of *The Lover*, out of all these stuccos, pediments, and sham pillars by way of trimming, plus the solid masonry of his pathetic jealousy, you see what an edifice he builds. He doesn't connect me, George Greydon Hart, with George Greydon his enemy, his 'Robinson.' G. G. Hart is on my card, and I've always been careful to sink my own name professionally because of the suggestion of something hook-nosed and lisping that it conveys; though, as a matter of fact, it derives from the Danish: we're still a fair family after eight hundred years. So with that innocuous bit of paste-board on the table before him, that he had been rolling in his fingers ever since I had tossed it to him at his own request, he pours out his spleen and proves with every word that this George Greydon, to whose iniquities I listen so demurely, has no more responsibility for the Robinsonian legend than G. G. Hart himself. An amazing thing is jealousy! What did Damaris say?—if indeed one may believe any more in his accuracy as a reporter—'To be jealous is to drown in a sewer!' I sat and watched him drown. For

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observe, said I to myself, he had loved her, he still loves her, more than any woman could be worth loving, and yet—how does he present her? Observe how he twists and maims, and wrecks, and mutilates her every careless word till it confirms his self-tormenting imaginations! Even that unfeeling bit of coquetry—yes, he had much to forgive!—even that wanton ‘I couldn’t make *your* lip quiver,’ directed so obviously, so cruelly, at his physical and spiritual isolation, he can quote to me as proof positive of an entanglement with another man. And in his insane envy of a straight back, a normal height and prime, her natural and necessary hob-nobbing with a fellow artist, the equally natural personal interest she takes in one so professionally important to her, becomes heaven knows what Arabian-nightmare of intrigue. Where is he going to end? In his malign chatter of ‘Robinsons’ he’ll be accusing me next, at my own table, to my own face, of seducing her—Damaris, my good friend!

And yet, was I indignant? Was I bored, after the first resisted impulse to laughter? Not I! I was deeply interested, professionally grateful for this block of human nature that its own storms had this night rent in two, baring to me its prostrate virgin sides, its fossil pasts, even maybe its jewels,

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its gleams, if not of diamond, if not of true gold, at least of crystal and glittering micas, beneath the dislodged covering of patient surface grass and flowers nodding drunkenly. If Damaris and her legend were a lost tale, a blown puff-ball, what a tale instead was he! I might no longer believe or be disturbed by him as a purveyor of information, but as a wreck of nature—Lord, how he intrigued me! You who do not write, you can never see what a prize he was. I have dealt with lunatics; but I have never before come across a sane man obsessed: and his obsession, bindweeding itself as it did round this woman I knew so well, involving as it did not me but my pen name and my pen productions, was treasure trove. *I* wasn't going to cut him short. My job at that moment was to suppress the tickling imps of laughter that inwardly unsteadied me and let him proceed with no more than an irresistible 'Continuez! Continuez toujours, Monsieur!' and a fit of coughing. And then to start him again—

"Come! You promised me the second act!"

"The second act," says he, wilfully misunderstanding me, "but we're in it already, Mr.—er—"
"Hart. First act—exposition! Second act—"
"—climax! Third act—catastrophe! Isn't that
"the playwright's formula? Or as the layman

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“ would put it—‘ Birth and death, and between
“ them flower in bloom!’ Wasn’t she flower in
“ bloom that summer? You shouldn’t be im-
“ patient! Climax before catastrophe: and we’re
“ half-way through the second act of it. Are you
“ afraid you’ll be cheated of your catastrophe?
“ Don’t be afraid!” He broke off to finger the
scattered letters, stacking them into a neat pile
again, their flaps scrupulously pressed down.

I said—

“ Afraid? ”

Said he—

“ You think I’m mad, don’t you? ” And then,
smiling—“ Yes, I think you’re a little afraid of
“ me.”

I said airily—

“ Afraid? when I make you free of my very love
“ letters? ”

“ Love letters? ” He said it slowly, with an
intense stare at me, as if to his own dismay he had
made some slip, left so to speak his king to be
huffed and now watched me, pretending not to
watch, to see if I’d notice the square left open.
“ Are these—love letters? ”

I couldn’t keep a straight face:

“ Pickwickian,” I said—“ purely Pickwickian!
“ Lamb chops and tomato sauce! Don’t confuse

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“ me with Robinson! ” And so burst out laughing.

He laughed too, uncertainly at first, then as loudly as I myself:

“ No! ” says he, “ we’ll keep you separate, quite separate, as Damaris did her Jekyll and Hyde in the second act. I always thought they were so fresh, those quick little shifting scenes, first between the wife and the shadowy ideal husband, then, with no more than the slam of a door, the same scene with the real one. His awakening suspicion, his tragi-comic jealousy of—himself, was well worked out.”

“ It was humorous,” I admitted.

“ Humorous? Ah, but I speak of the first night. That climax is a scream now, I confess; but on the first night, Lord help you if you’d laughed: they’d have thrown you out! You could have heard a pin drop in the exposure scene.”

“ You mean where the snap-shot is produced? ”

“ Of the wife and the lover—yes. I shall never forget it. Little Joe Dubedat was the detective, wasn’t he? His make-up was good, so was his look at her and his apologetic stammer, tailing into silence as Damaris stretched out her hand, took it from him, looked at it, and passed it silently over the table to the husband. Maginnis

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“ was excellent too as the husband. Do you
“ remember his bewildered expression? Do you
“ remember the queer jump in his voice?—‘ But
“ ‘ this is myself! It’s a fake, damn you! It’s a
“ ‘ picture of myself!’ and Damaris’s slow flush
“ (how does she get that flush to come when she
“ wants it, night after night?) and her quiet—
“ ‘ Who else should it be?’ as the curtain comes
“ down. It was her stillness that was so exciting.
“ And it was clever of her, too, to ensure a big
“ part to Maginnis. Have you ever known an
“ actor-manager resist the chance of a double?
“ Yes, she knew her world.”

“ She? Do the poor brute who wrote it some
“ justice! ”

“ You’re taking up the cudgels for Robinson?
“ That’s amusing! ” said he.

It was more amusing than he realized; but I
merely said patiently—

“ Why not drop the Robinson? *The Lover* was
“ written by George Greydon. Why you couldn’t
“ say Greydon at first passes me! ”

He shrugged his shoulders:

“ You know him, don’t you, slightly? All you
“ writers know each other. You have your own
“ ideas of him, no doubt. But if our collaboration
“ was to succeed you had to be virgin soil for my

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“ tale. Come now, haven’t you a different idea of
“ him from what you’d have had if he’d been
“ George Greydon from the start? And even so,
“ have we, you or I, seen this Robinson as Damaris
“ saw him or as he sees himself? Whose eyes see
“ clearest? see as God sees? It’s not easy to under-
“ stand a human soul. I hate him. She loved him.
“ You play the neutral, eh? as a writer should?
“ But who sees him clearest? Shall you stare if I
“ say Damaris? She loved him: she saw him
“ heroical: and yet I’m prepared to say that she
“ knew him best, knew him as a mother does,
“ adoring the faults that she would have weeded
“ away if she could. Love may be born blind, but
“ once full-grown its eyesight is keen, I think.
“ It stares at the sun till its eyes fill with tears.
“ Dazzled? no! But because it sees the dark
“ spots. Damaris certainly saw them in him.
“ I have never forgotten her curious shrewd
“ analysis of their relationship after the play was
“ finished. She had come in to me quietly one
“ evening with the great news. I had expected
“ jubilations, but she was oddly sober:

“ ‘ It’s done, Jimmy! Typed and corrected,
“ ‘ and Maginnis has taken it. It’s to be put on in
“ ‘ May.’

“ ‘ Not for four months?’

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“ ‘ Oh, I’m glad of that. I’ve got so much to do
“ ‘ to it, to persuade Maginnis to do. He—’ (*he*
“ ‘ meant only one person in our talks) ‘ he’s going
“ ‘ away for a holiday—won’t be back till rehearsals
“ ‘ come on. I’m glad of that too. We—he and I
“ ‘ —we don’t get any further. He wants a change
“ ‘ from me. It’s my fault. I’ve put so much into
“ ‘ *The Lover* that I—I’ve nothing to say to him.
“ ‘ I’m drained. I think I get stupider every day.
“ ‘ Besides, he’s a little annoyed with me, I think,
“ ‘ subconsciously. I worried him dreadfully over
“ ‘ *The Lover*. He didn’t know I did, but I knew.
“ ‘ I was hustling him. I had to, Jimmy. He
“ ‘ wanted to make the woman in it—Hetty—me
“ ‘ —like all his other women: what he calls
“ ‘ complex: what he calls passionate. I call them
“ ‘ just horrid women. I call them promiscuous.
“ ‘ It’s not a bit his fault. It’s just that he doesn’t
“ ‘ know anything about ordinary women like me.
“ ‘ He thinks ordinary women haven’t got passion.
“ ‘ I hate that word. Isn’t love enough? Passion!
“ ‘ Oh, he doesn’t know what it is to sit in a room
“ ‘ with someone and when they move or turn, each
“ ‘ movement, each turn, is so new, so beautiful,
“ ‘ so dear, that it catches you by the throat, like
“ ‘ poetry. But they move about or read or write,
“ ‘ do their work, so wrapt up in themselves. Then

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“ ‘ you say under your breath, the words rise to the
“ ‘ very verge of your lips as you sit willing and
“ ‘ winging your soul across to them—“ I love you.
“ ‘ I love you. I love you so. Is it possible that
“ ‘ you hear nothing, that you feel nothing, when
“ ‘ I love you so? ’ But the clock goes on tick-
“ ‘ ing and you go on sitting quite still, quite prim:
“ ‘ and they don’t feel and they don’t hear. Ah,
“ ‘ he doesn’t know! ’

“ ‘ I know, Damaris,’ I said. On that for an
“ instant she lifted her head to stare at me, moved,
“ I daresay, with something of the dreadful hope
“ of one whose hand, groping along the wall of a
“ life’s prison, touches in the blackness a human,
“ a fellow prisoner’s hand. Then her glance,
“ summing me up for the thing I was, wavered and
“ dulled. But she only said tenderly—oh God, her
“ intolerable tenderness!—

“ ‘ Jimmy, to love a mother or a sister, it’s not
“ ‘ the same.’ Then, flushing a little—‘ Not even
“ ‘ the other way round. What they call mother-
“ ‘ love, it’s not the same to a woman. A lesser
“ ‘ thing, Jimmy. A part of love, not love.’ And
“ then, because I shook my head——”

“ Did you? ” I asked him curiously.

He said, thinking it out—

“ Yes, I did. I did instinctively. A man would,

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“ don’t you think? It’s we, you know, not women, “ who enshrine the mother.” Then, with a sneer —“ Haven’t you noticed it in your studies? ”

But I said curiously—

“ Well, what did she say? ”

“ To my denial? Oh, she said desperately, as if “ I were the mere figure and symbol of some “ beloved, unpersuadable listener—

“ ‘ Can’t you see that to love a man includes all “ ‘ loves? Can’t you see? You must be wife to be “ ‘ mother: you must be lover to be wife: the “ ‘ children are his echoes when they come. Oh, “ ‘ can’t you see?’ And that was the only time “ I ever heard Damaris speak of children.”

“ Except in *The Lover*,” said I, remembering my heroine’s cry at the end of the first act—“ the “ ‘ If you’d given me children, we’d be lovers “ ‘ still! ’ ”

“ Ah yes!” he agreed quietly, “ we mustn’t “ forget that.”

“ Though there, of course—” I was silky with him—“ though the voice is the voice of Damaris, “ the sentiments are Robinson’s.”

He said—

“ Are they? I wonder. I wonder and— “ remember.”

Said I tartly—

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“ He wrote the play, my good man! Robinson
“ or Greydon or—” I checked myself in time—
“ or whatever you choose to call him, he wrote the
“ play, for all your wonderings and rememberings.”
And then, because he, lost in his own thoughts,
noticed me no more than he noticed the noises
of the stirring morning street outside the window,
I leaned over the table and shuffled at the papers in
front of him to attract his attention. Instantly his
hand smashed down on them like a beast’s paw on
its meat:

“ Leave them alone! ” It came out in a growl
before, blinking at me, he followed it up with—
“ Eh? What? I beg your pardon!” and drew
his hand confusedly over his eyes.

I said—

“ Wake up! What remembrance are you
“ boggling at, eh? ”

Said he, softly, slowly, as if he were speaking by
rote, a page learned long ago—

“ ‘ Jimmy, he doesn’t understand women be-
“ ‘ cause he doesn’t understand love. Love’s not
“ ‘ come his way. Only the other thing has come
“ ‘ his way. So when I push and prod him into
“ ‘ making her—Hetty, my part—a real woman,
“ ‘ a human woman, he sneers: he says that I
“ ‘ chadband, that I’m obsessed by the tr-rew and

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“ ‘the be-ewtiful! He’s written her my way
“ ‘because it’s my idea and he promised me; but
“ ‘he says she’s colourless, he says she doesn’t
“ ‘interest him, he says she’s a Victorian abstrac-
“ ‘tion and that the public will love her. I’m that
“ ‘to him, you know, when he thinks of me—a
“ ‘Victorian abstraction. Oh, but wait till I play
“ ‘her! He won’t think so then.’ ”

Said I, curiously—

“ You absolutely assert that she said these things
“ to you—to you, a third person? ” For I was
professionally interested in the fact that his gift for
telling a tale should be combined with such utter
incapacity to construct as its pivot a psychologically
plausible human being. He hadn’t the brains to
see that it was logically impossible that the woman
he was trying to foist on me as the authentic
Damaris could ever have spoken with the abandon-
ment he described. In fact, he saw double. His
own emotions had intoxicated him.

“ I absolutely assert it! ” he repeated vehem-
ently. “ A Victorian abstraction wouldn’t have
“ said them, I daresay, but she did. ”

“ In other words she was a woman without
“ reticence. Is that what you’re out to establish? ”

“ Reticence? Has a river reticence when the
“ snows melt in spring? But she didn’t cry herself

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“ in the streets, if you mean that. Only, she could talk to me. Laugh if you choose; but I think she cared for me.”

“ Have it your own way! ” I said. “ It’s a wonderful tale at any rate, wonderful past whooping.” For I was absurdly nettled by the ‘ pushing and prodding! ’ A lie is not less a thorn in the finger because you know it is a lie. It was a pure invention, of course. She couldn’t have said such things. I used to read her my stuff; but she always liked it. Why, we had our regular programme! I’d dictate the work of the night before and then she’d read it aloud (very well she read it!) and I’d correct. I, not she. Then we’d talk over the next scene for an hour or so of amiable give and take, and on the following day there would be dictation once more. If you call that a collaboration, I don’t, and I’ll swear Damaris never did. I know my Damaris. Know her? Why, it was my instinctive recognition of the likeness between us that first drifted us together, just as that very likeness in time drifted us apart. Success in our professions meant more to us than fifty friendships, and we honoured that single eye in each other. ‘ Give and take ’ was our rule. *The Lover* is an example. I’d never have written it if I hadn’t been pressed for money and without an idea in my head.

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In such case what could I do but adapt, without much caring for it, an anecdote she told me. So far, I admit that Cairns was justified in his statement: the germ had come from her. But I'll swear that it was I who said, breaking in on her chatter—

‘Wait a bit, Damaris! There's a play in that!’ I remember distinctly that she was doubtful. She said—

‘There's no third act to it.’ And I said—I, not she—

‘No third act? My dear girl, can't you see that the play exists for the sake of the third act? In the first act the lover wakes: in the second act the husband: in the third the wife herself. And as soon as she wakes to her husband's jealous misery, the lover begins to fade back into the mirror of her own self-consciousness. I shall use the symbolism of the mirror for the final curtain. He can break in to the darkened room with a—
“Caught at last!” at which she, without a word, turns on the light. A chance for you there, Damaris! And there they are, two people, not three, face to face with themselves and the truth.’

‘The truth?’ says Damaris with a little start, almost as if she'd not been following. I remember that it annoyed me, though I knew her absent-minded way well enough.

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I said impatiently—

‘Can’t you see? His only rival was her ideal of him, the only lover their mutual passion.’ “Myself!” says he, understanding at last. Then a quick curtain on the kiss. Ought to go like hot cakes. Can’t you see it?’

She acquiesced at once—

‘Oh yes, I see it.’ And with that we got to work. ‘Pushing and prodding!’ She couldn’t have employed such a phrase. She was as grateful as could be. You should have seen her sparkling, ambitious eyes when I threw across to her the finished MS. with—

‘There, take it, child! And much good may it do you!’

She caught it up with—

‘Oh thank you! I do thank you! You’ll see, it will do me—much good.’ And it was then that I said to her, as I told Cairns, teasing her—

‘You shouldn’t dream of the first night till your contract’s signed.’ And she, crimson, ingenuously embarrassed—

‘I wasn’t! I wasn’t!’ And quickly, to change the subject—‘Contracts? The contract won’t take long. Maginnis will jump at it.’

She was right there. Maginnis always preferred my lighter vein: he thinks that I don’t know why.

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It's because I always let him have a free hand with minor work. I attend rehearsals when it's anything important, but I abhor the fuss and fag of preparation quite as much as he detests an author at his elbow, and since Damaris and I had worked together there was the less reason for me to come. I could trust my level-headed young lady. And Maginnis's inflations and depressions, his loud voice and greasy hair never worried Damaris as they did me. Give and take! The three acts were my job: Maginnis and rehearsals were hers. As I said to her when I left town—

‘The rest's in your hands. I'm off to Wandon to do some real work.’

She didn't mind. She said so. She said—

‘Oh, you needn't come to rehearsals! But ‘dress rehearsal—’ Then, as I shook my head, the train began to move and she to run along beside it— ‘But on the night, Greydon—’ I particularly remember her using my name: she never called me anything as a rule, ‘On the night—’

I laughed at her—

‘You make it a success and I'll come and see it ‘fast enough!’ I said.

Her answer was roared away as we gathered speed, but I saw her nod and smile. Then I turned back into the carriage and settled myself

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for the journey, smiling a little over her enthusiasm. Dear Damaris! But of course she could only see literature from the one angle of stage effect. At the bottom of my heart sat Truth, the chilly matron, affirming between chattering teeth that, Damaris or no Damaris, the critics would call the play a pot-boiler.

VI

Ah well! Success is sweet, but the day of endeavour is sweeter! With a half sigh for that far-away day and companion, I roused myself to find Cairns watchfully awaiting my pleasure. He had subsided in his chair with his hands bracing him against the table edge, so that you saw no more of him than his head and shoulders and the gripping fingers. What with his round unblinking eyes and intense frown he looked like a starved Tom intent on invisible prey. Behind him the bobbin of the blind, stirring in a draught, heightened the likeness with its suggestion of a twitching tail-tip. The pose broke up as I moved though, and before I could say more than "Well, what is it?" irritably, because I hate to be observed, he was his garrulous, high-pitched self again:

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“What is it? Merely a passing wonder as to
“the whither-away of your thoughts. You were
“far away, weren’t you? A woman? When one
“smiles and frowns at once it’s generally a woman.”

I said indulgently—

“Whence do you get that piece of wisdom?”

“‘When they smile and frown at once it’s
“‘generally a man!’ says Damaris. I reversed it
“for your benefit. She, of course, was talking of
“her part in the second act: ‘It must be played so
“‘quietly, smiling and frowning at once. Her
“‘mind’s dwelling on her lover while she talks
“‘to her husband and it shows in her face. Her
“‘husband can’t get at her, not even to upset her.
“‘She’s perfectly serene. She knows the dream
“‘will come at her call so soon as the door closes
“‘on him. It gives her a—a secret look, a look
“‘of one who has treasure hidden away.’”

“Did she say that?”

“She said it. Hadn’t she grown to full stature
“to know that? But with it the same immature
“craving for confirmation of the things she knew
“so much better than the rest of us. Why can’t
“artists and women believe in themselves?

“‘Isn’t that the way to play her, Jimmy?
“‘Wouldn’t you play her so? I think that’s how
“‘a woman would behave. Maginnis is so good

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“ ‘with me in that scene: so helpful: we work
“ ‘each other up.’ ”

I said, interested—

“ There, that’s it! That’s the puzzle. That
“ tallies with the Damaris Payne I knew. She was
“ professional: she would see it as a question of
“ mechanics. But this exquisite Damaris of yours,
“ how can she let him ‘work her up’? How can
“ she thrill to him? You’d think he’d sicken her.”

“ What is art? Isn’t it in just such moments
“ that the god takes charge? What’s Pythia then?
“ What’s Damaris? Reeds shaken by the wind.
“ And that’s why we’ve got a story to tell. Be
“ thankful for it and get out your purse and count
“ me my pennies: for I’m nearing the end: the
“ end of the rehearsals and the end of the story.
“ Not that I can tell you much about rehearsals:
“ I was laid up till the last week with influenza.
“ I got her reports, of course; but I only saw her
“ at night and seldom for more than a few minutes.
“ Maginnis is a nigger driver, as you know, though
“ she needed no driving. Sometimes they re-
“ hearsed till one in the morning. But he had the
“ grace to concede them a day between dress
“ rehearsal and first night. She spent it with me.
“ ‘Well?’ said I, ‘does it go?’ ”

“ Outwent her hand to the woodwork behind her:

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“ ‘ Jimmy, don’t tempt providence! ’ Then,
“ ‘ relenting—‘ I think it will. I hope it will.
“ ‘ We’ve had to alter a good deal. ’

“ ‘ What does the author say to that? ’

“ ‘ Oh, we’ve a free hand,’ she said quickly, ‘ he
“ ‘ isn’t coming till the first night. He always said
“ ‘ he shouldn’t. I’m glad. ’

“ ‘ I didn’t say ‘ why? ’ I waited. And after a
“ ‘ moment she went on, with a new note in her
“ ‘ voice, with a touch of bitterness that wasn’t like
“ ‘ her, that didn’t suit her—

“ ‘ ‘ I don’t want him just now. I’ve got too
“ ‘ much to do. I haven’t time for him. There
“ ‘ isn’t time for him and the acting too. You
“ ‘ needn’t laugh: he does take a lot of looking
“ ‘ after. He’s a full working day. Why, when
“ ‘ we’re together I might be his wife, twenty years
“ ‘ married. Oh yes, we’re queerly like those two
“ ‘ people in the play, he and I! Twenty years
“ ‘ married, and she’s never once got through to
“ ‘ the real man any more than I have. Oh yes,
“ ‘ it’s an easy part to rehearse. But not with him
“ ‘ watching. No. Let him go away if he wants
“ ‘ to and do his work without me—if he can!
“ ‘ I can wait. To-morrow and to-morrow and
“ ‘ to-morrow—and I shall have broken through to
“ ‘ him then for good and all. Then I shall have

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“ ‘peace, I suppose.’ And at that, soft-eyed, once
“ more the Damaris that I loved—‘It will be
“ ‘heavenly to be happy.’

“ ‘Damaris! Damaris!’ I warned her. She
“ terrified me. She was a silly child on the edge
“ of a precipice, craning over the edge for flowers.

“ She smiled securely:

“ ‘Are you afraid for me? I tell you he needs
“ ‘me: he tells me so every moment I’m with him,
“ ‘in a hundred ways. It’s not his fault that—that
“ ‘we are as we are. It’s I who am unkind to him.
“ ‘He’s like a blind man saying, “Who’s there?”
“ ‘into the darkness, and listening for a movement:
“ ‘but I never answer him, dumb fool that I am!
“ ‘And so—stump! stump! goes his lonely stick
“ ‘again. That’s how it is, Jimmy. I’m dumb
“ ‘and he’s blind, and so we go on wasting our
“ ‘days. Three years! Three years! The fourth
“ ‘year’s nearly out. D’you know the first night’s
“ ‘fixed for the ninth? That’s four years to the
“ ‘day since we met. Let’s go to bed. I’m so
“ ‘tired. I can’t hold myself.’ And then, as she
“ ‘gave me her hand—‘Oh Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy,
“ ‘I shall pull it off, shan’t I? Say I shall pull it
“ ‘off!’

“ I said, tired out too—

“ ‘Ask Maginnis! What does he say to it all?’

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“ ‘Maginnis? ‘ ‘Let it fizz, Miss Payne! Be
“ ‘still there in the flies, can’t you? Now,
“ ‘Damaris! A little too much fizz, my dear!’ ”
“ ‘That’s Maginnis! Oh, he’s pleased. He
“ ‘never fiddle-faddles until we’re practically
“ ‘ready. Of course he’s nervous: so’s everyone.
“ ‘It *is* queer stuff. But I’m not nervous. For
“ ‘the first time in years I’m not sick with stage
“ ‘fright. Jimmy, I could play that part if every
“ ‘man and woman in the house were a personal
“ ‘enemy: play and win, too. You think me so
“ ‘vain, don’t you, when I talk like that? It’s not
“ ‘me at all, it’s the power. What is this power,
“ ‘Jimmy? It scares me to feel it stir.

“ ‘I loved Ophelia: forty thousand brothers
Could not with all their quantity of love
Make up my sum.

“ ‘I’ve heard that called rant. What fools people
“ ‘are! It’s windy stuff if you like; but that’s how
“ ‘the wind speaks in one’s ears. One’s like a
“ ‘tree in a hurricane under it: bow or break!
“ ‘ “Millions of acres!” “Make up my sum!”
“ ‘Aren’t they immense sounds? Doesn’t a wind
“ ‘fill them? Me? I’m nothing. I can’t act.
“ ‘But on the night—I’ll trust the power!’ ”

“ ‘And off she went with her eyes shining like a
“ ‘cat’s in the dark. I thought—‘I hope to God

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“ ‘ she’ll last! ’ Maginnis and she were two fools
“ over rehearsals. He could afford to spend energy,
“ but she had thinned to a ghost. But, as she said
“ when I remonstrated, it suited the part. And so
“ of course it did. Nevertheless, at dress rehearsal
“ she was so flat that Maginnis was scared. He
“ didn’t let her see it at the time—he had that much
“ sense; but I met him at her door on the night,
“ armed, good fellow, with champagne. It was
“ two part business precaution, of course, but one
“ part at least was kindness. He was proud of
“ Damaris. After all, she was his find. Fortunately
“ I was in time to stop him with—

“ ‘ Good Lord, Maginnis! Keep it away from
“ ‘ her! Have you seen her to-night? ’

“ No, he hadn’t. I said—

“ ‘ She’s drunk already. Pour that down any-
“ ‘ one’s throat; but leave her alone! ’

“ He stood digesting it, a comic picture, shirt-
“ sleeved, greased but not painted, without his wig:

“ ‘ Well! ’ he said at last—he knew me pretty
“ well—‘ I’ll take your word for it.’ And then—
“ ‘ What’s she drunk on? ’

“ I said—

“ ‘ Call it the artistic temperament and come
“ ‘ away. She’ll hear us.’

“ He went off with me quite meckly back to his

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“ dressing-room. Once there he picked up a
“ tumbler and emptied half the bottle into it. His
“ hand shook as he drank it down.

“ ‘ I’ve spent three thousand on this show,’ says
“ he, ‘ besides what I owe.’ And then—‘ It’s not
“ ‘ the play I’m backing, it’s the girl. Drunk, is
“ ‘ she? Glad to hear it! I don’t give a fig for
“ ‘ temperament. I always told her to get drunk.
“ ‘ What’s her tippie at last? Ah well, that’s not
“ ‘ my business.’ The call-boy’s voice rang down
“ the passage: ‘ Half an hour! Half an hour!’
“ He dashed to his chair and began rubbing on
“ flesh colour. I said—

“ ‘ I’ll go. I like to watch the house. Good
“ ‘ luck!’

“ ‘ Thanks!’ says Maginnis, nodding at me in
“ the glass. And then—‘ Here! You drink up
“ ‘ the other half! You look as if you need it.’
“ It was the effect of the electric lights of course,
“ set round the mirror. They’d bleach out any
“ man, and he was red with make-up. Still I was
“ glad of it. Emotional place, the theatre! The
“ dressers, the stage hands, the very door-keepers
“ are involved in that commercial witches’-sabbath.

“ ‘ Miss Payne’s very fine, sir, in the second act!’
“ says the attendant as I go down: ‘ Watched her
“ ‘ yesterday.’

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“ ‘Think we’ve got a chance, sir?’ flutters the
“ programme-seller as I settle myself at the side
“ near the pass door. Then the people began to
“ flock in: the familiar faces of a first night. They
“ were strange to me then. How I feared ’em!
“ The gods—that was the right word. Damaris
“ was at the mercy of the gods, with her whole life
“ to be made or marred by them. For I shared her
“ belief that, though her chance as an actress might
“ come again, it was now or never where her per-
“ sonal happiness was concerned. D’you remember
“ the ballad?—

“ The night it is good Hallow E’en
 When fairy folk do ride,
Then win me, win me, an ye will—

“ But they only ride once in seven years remember!
“ How long would love stand waiting, do you
“ suppose, if the night and the chance were missed?
“ Seven whole years? And there’s another point:

“ Aye at the end of seven years
 We pay a tiend to hell.

“ Bernard Shaw means much the same, I fancy,
“ when he says that a man remakes himself every
“ seventh year. But does a woman remake herself?
“ What does Shaw say about women? ”

I put my hands to my ears:

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‘ Hell and *Tam-Lin* and Bernard Shaw! Are
“ you lunatic? ”

He said gravely—

“ I’m telling you my thoughts while I waited for
“ the curtain to go up: telling you them just as
“ they ran up and down in my mind like a kitten
“ on a keyboard. Lunatic? I suppose so! The
“ moon was to rise on London at eight fifteen and
“ —watchman! what of the night? Chatter,
“ chatter, chatter went the house, and the violins
“ squeaked away under the palms unheard: and
“ while I listened to my own thoughts spoken in
“ my ear as if by a neighbour, I watched the outer
“ curtain with its sprawl of Watteau goddesses, and
“ out of the tail of my eye, the stage box, Box A,
“ author’s box. I was the only one who watched it,
“ I fancy. He was not well known in those days.
“ There were people in it, friends of his, I suppose;
“ but I didn’t see him. I thought, ‘ He’s waiting
“ till the lights go down,’ and they went down
“ even as I thought it. Then, of course, I could
“ see nothing; besides, as I peered, the most
“ breath-catching sound I’d ever heard slewed me
“ round in my seat, the click, the soft rattling whirr
“ of the lifting curtain.”

“ I wish I’d been there, now,” said I involun-
tarily.

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He said, picking at the scattered shreds of my card—

“ Yes, it’s a pity you weren’t there.”

“ I suppose she *was* rather wonderful? ” I said to egg him on. “ There’s a bloom on the performance at a first night that’s never preserved, however much, technically, it may improve.”

“ It was not preserved,” he said heavily. And then—“ Yes, a pity you weren’t there.”

I said, smiling to myself—

“ I’ve some idea of it though! I happened to “ see a good many notices.” And then, for it was an old sore with me—“ Audience and critic, they’re “ all alike! They always call a good actress a great “ one if she gets a part worth playing.”

“ You think it was a part worth playing then? ” he said.

I shrugged my shoulders:

“ I judge by the notices. They were almost “ hysterical about her.”

“ So was the audience. But you’re wrong. It “ was not merely Damaris and the part: it was “ Damaris in the part. It was his triumph as much “ as hers, whatever the critics might say. They “ said ‘ sentimental,’ didn’t they? ”

“ Did they? ” said I, innocently.

“ Sentimental or not, it was what the public

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“ wanted and they showed it. Six curtains at the
“ end of the first act: ten or twelve at the second:
“ at the third, pandemonium! I was watching
“ from the wings—I had slipped through the pass
“ door by that time—and the noise was deafening.
“ The company, half laughing, half frightened,
“ took calls till I lost count. And then, on one
“ impulse as it seemed, for you couldn’t hear the
“ stage-manager speak in that din, they fled to
“ either wing and left Damaris to face it. She?
“ She was quite calm. Why not? It was her
“ moment. Did you ever see bliss in human
“ eyes? She stood in front of the blood-black
“ curtains and smiled and swayed to that rage of
“ delight. All the while her eyes were searching,
“ searching. The individual stalls, the wide grey
“ sweep of the circles, the rabbit-hutch boxes—her
“ eyes ranged them all. Her eyes were a voice
“ calling: her whole body was a sweet call. The
“ house, the maddened house, called with her:
“ ‘ Author! Author!’ The noise grew. You
“ know what it’s like when the mutter begins.”

I knew what he meant, but—

“ I never took a call in my life,” I said. “ Audi-
“ ences are tricky things.”

“ You’d have been safe,” said he—“ as safe as—
“ Robinson! They wanted him. He’d have been

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“ king of London that night. They were stamping
“ and roaring and barking for him, and she behind
“ the curtain, wild with delight:

“ ‘ Where is he? He must come. Can’t you
“ ‘ hear them?’

“ Nobody had seen him.

“ ‘ He wouldn’t come near. He was afraid of
“ ‘ making me nervous. But now—tell him to
“ ‘ come! Quick! They’re growing crazy. Find
“ ‘ him!’ She slipped through the curtains and
“ returned again: ‘Where is he? Oh, where is he?’

“ Suddenly from both sides of the curtain came
“ the lull. The stage manager was whispering at
“ her ear. Beyond the curtains it was as if the
“ theatre listened to that interchange—

“ ‘ Not to be found! Not in the theatre?’

“ A voice came from the group—

“ ‘ Did he say he’d come?’

“ She began to sway like a tree sawn three parts
“ through:

“ ‘ Not here?’ she said—‘ Not here?’

“ Beyond the curtain the outcry was heard
“ again—

“ ‘ Author! Author! Speech!’

“ I caught at her sleeve:

“ ‘ Damaris! I think he meant what he said—
“ ‘ if the play succeeded—’

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“ She remembered:

“ ‘ He meant it then? He never meant to
“ ‘ come?’ ”

“ Maginnis was dancing up and down like a
“ cork. The sweat was popping up and down
“ through his paint:

“ ‘ Someone must speak to ’em—’ The clamour
“ drowned his voice. And then the fool of a
“ curtain hand mistook his cue and the curtains
“ parted on the group of us. There was wild
“ laughter and fresh thunders while we stamped
“ to the wings: we—not Damaris. With a gesture
“ she faced the uproar: her voice pierced it like an
“ arrow and with some such pang as an arrow
“ wound must make, I heard it:

“ ‘ Ladies and gentlemen! When I asked the
“ ‘ author whether he intended to be present, he
“ ‘ replied that if we made a success of the play
“ ‘ he—’ ever so slightly she lifted her shoulders—
“ ‘ might come and see it!’ ”

“ It was not the words, it was the tone. If she
“ had given them a smile they would have taken
“ the joke of it. At a lead from her they would
“ have roared themselves hoarse. But she sneered,
“ you see. Like a schoolmistress she reproved
“ them for their folly of enthusiasm. It was as if
“ she said—‘ Dear people, why this fuss?’ They

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“ sat back though they did not consciously realize
“ it, cooled, estranged, insulted. There was no
“ more clapping. They remembered that trains
“ were to be caught. They streamed out, gather-
“ ing up wraps. Maginnis was raving in the
“ wings. He rushed at her:

“ ‘ You’re mad! You’re mad! You’ve ruined
“ ‘ the whole show! You’ve damned it! ’

“ ‘ I? ’ she snarled, in a voice, with a look at him,
“ with a gesture—oh, horrible! Not my Damaris.
“ It was a raucous voice: it was a look—a street
“ creature’s trapped backward look at the blue-
“ coat grip on her shoulder: it was a gesture so
“ rank in its defiance that you’d think excess of
“ pain had brought some gross ancestress within
“ her from age-deep burial to re-birth. Horrible,
“ I tell you! Such rending birth was obscene.
“ And public, you understand—she writhed in
“ public, she who had been proud! Not my
“ Damaris any more: she was as little atoned to
“ her own womanhood as a hunk of butcher’s meat
“ to the sweet-breath’d kine. An instant still she
“ stayed, fronting us, a pillar of indecent agony,
“ and then—flight, the shuddering flight of a dog
“ too much, too much ill-used. I said, sharply
“ whispering—

“ ‘ Don’t follow! ’

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“ And then we stood where we were staring at each other, moving a step now and then, while the stage-hands jostled us as if we'd been wooden dolls to be shifted. At last Maginnis said—

“ ‘ Look at that now! ’ And then—‘ It's a drink I'm wanting. The call's eleven sharp. Let her know, will you? ’ And he went off to his dressing-room and I to the passage outside her shut door to wait for her.”

He broke off.

“ It'll want working up, of course; but a good story, isn't it? Enjoying it? ”

I said, I groaned—

“ Go on! It's your hour.” Yes, I gave myself away then if he had been less absorbed in his revelations. But he was in full flood; and though I had no longer any wish to hear I could not stop him, could no more stop his arrival at his fore-ordained conclusion than I can stop the arrival at its destination of the letter I slip into the post. He had risen. The outline of my lacquer cabinet was lost in the fall of the window curtain, but in the struggle between electric light and blue dawn its scarlet leaped forward to enclose his gross shape as in other dawns his bloody cloak enwrapped an executioner. The night was over. But oh, though the dawns come and come again, the night-

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mare does not pass. I go over it nightly: I begin as the dark falls. Sleep? I haven't slept for a month! This that I have written is not one memory; but nightly out of my memories I learn one speech by heart, add to my repertory one answer, one re-lived scene, one pang of his or hers or mine: how else could I write down now this nightmare whole? 'Subliminal—beneath the threshold!' what's the cant? Ah well, there's something in it, I suppose; for at the time I should have said that I took in little enough. His voice muttered and lowered and rumbled, and my own thoughts ran parallel like the tramway lines outside till, like those trams rumbling towards us, our mutual hates grew loud a moment and passed again. I sat on in my chair as if I had been bound to it, as they bind the condemned; while he, like the Lord of Flies loosing his hosts upon a naked land, loosed upon me in clouds the poisoned torments of his speech:

"Working up, yes! As I say, the end's for you
"to handle. You'll call it slight as I tell it, anti-
"climax, a tailing away. But you, no doubt, will
"invent your effective curtain and—I waste
"words, eh?"

"Go on!" I said again.

"On and on and on, like life after the curtain's

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“ down. On and on as we went on, Damaris and I,
“ through the emptying streets, till I thought she’d
“ reel with fatigue. I thought the hotel would
“ never come in sight. But all things come if you
“ bide your time, all things, even the vengeance of
“ the Lord. The place was abed and asleep. We
“ went up the stairs in silence and at the door of her
“ rooms she said ‘ Good-night, Jimmy! ’ went in
“ and shut the door.”

“ And you? ” I had got back my voice.

“ I? I waited. An hour, two hours, ten
“ minutes—I don’t know. The house was as still
“ as a grave. Now and then I heard the rattle of a
“ cab outside, then the silence again louder still.
“ The moon shone in through the window at the
“ end of the corridor. I—what do you think I did
“ for an hour on end? I counted and recounted
“ the shoes at the bedroom doors. I thought—
“ ‘ Two and two, and two and two—that’s life!
“ ‘ That’s how things ought to be. But we,
“ ‘ Damaris and I, we’re the odd ones, odd shoes
“ ‘ on the rubbish heap.’ I thought that very
“ humorous and pathetic and Barrie-ish: indeed
“ my mind began to behave as if I were dreaming,
“ pretending to make the solemn pairs of boots
“ and shoes set to partners and pirouette and
“ smirk. And then I discovered that they were

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“ jogging up and down so jauntily because my eyes
“ were glazed with tears. I tell you, that passage
“ was like a corridor in hell, what with the quiet
“ and the dancing shoes with their tongues
“ flapping, and the moon’s smile looming out of
“ heaven at me like the face of Lazarus licking its
“ lips over Dives’ pain. I tell you it was driving
“ me mad. And then in that silence of deep night
“ I heard, dulled by the door between us, a sound.”

His face whitened till I thought he was going to faint.

“ I knocked. I got no answer. I knocked
“ again. Then I went in. She was in the inner
“ room. She had undressed herself and put on a
“ nightgown and plaited her hair for the night.
“ Her clothes were tidily piled, her table neat.
“ She sat on the edge of her bed and her face was
“ puckered like a monkey’s and she was screaming
“ under her breath very softly, twisting and gasp-
“ ing on an invisible wheel. In the silence you
“ could hear the blows fall and the bones of her
“ spirit breaking.”

I started up. I said—

“ Stop it, Cairns—stop it—for God’s sake! ”

He turned on me:

“ Why? It’s only a tale. Isn’t it a good tale?
“ Isn’t it the scoop of your life? As a serial now,

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“or even to print as fact? Print it, my son! She won’t deny it.”

But I was beyond his jeers. He had me broken, unresentful, a pure beggar: I could hear my words babbling out as if I were in drink:

“She got over it, eh? She got over it? Youth —time the healer. Cairns, these things pass?” When I drew away my hand where my head had leaned on it the fingers were smeared with sweat.

“Pass?” said he, and he had come a little closer, was gripping the rail of his chair as a parrot does, swinging himself towards me and away from me with each rise and fall of his voice—“Why yes, the hours passed and something of her passed with them. Not that she was dead in the morning: weaker, but not dead. Young people die slowly and she was hardy. It was not till the second night that she—how shall I say it? gave up the ghost, returned her spirit to the God that gave it.”

“The God?” I muttered.

“The God made Robinson. In the meantime the world had to run on, and it ran specially to see *The Lover*. *The Lover*, you may be sure, was ready for them. Rehearsal, you remember, at eleven. Maginnis started the ball, scowling yet half afraid of Damaris; for the notices had come

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“ in, you see, and on the whole she'd hit 'em. They
“ humm'd and hah'd over the play, didn't under-
“ stand it. Nevertheless our leading lady was all
“ the geniuses rolled into one. Says Maginnis,
“ brandishing cuttings—

“ ‘ Who are your friends, young woman? I
“ ‘ don't employ you for this! Come now, no
“ ‘ peacocking! You play the part as it's written,
“ ‘ d'you hear? First act, please!’ and settles
“ himself at the prompter's table, thumbs in his
“ armholes, crossed knees swinging, standing no
“ nonsense. Now a year, a month, a week ago,
“ she'd have walked out of the theatre on that.
“ She couldn't stand discourtesy, never could.
“ But on that morning, powdered and painted,
“ heavy-lidded, an actress acting an actress, you
“ understand, and all the properties in place, she
“ stood and listened and—smiled at him, deliber-
“ ately, the professional smile. I had never seen
“ her do such a thing before. Nor had Maginnis
“ for that matter: that's why he liked her. A very
“ decent man, Maginnis! Yet he reacted to it,
“ of course. Have you ever seen a man who
“ doesn't? And quick on it with an assurance, a
“ prodigality of power that took him like a blow
“ in the mouth, she says in a sweet high voice,
“ mincing a little—

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“ ‘ I know what you want exactly. Shall we
“ ‘ begin? Give me my cue, Mr.—er—’ And
“ then the juvenile lead, sulky till then over his
“ notices and injured at being called—he got his
“ smile, full measure, and—accepted it with
“ enthusiasm. She never had difficulty with men
“ after that, incidentally. They started. Within
“ five minutes Maginnis was whistling with
“ ecstasy, rubbing his hands, trotting over to me
“ to catch me by the shoulder and explode—

“ ‘ God! what’s come to the girl? She’s a
“ ‘ dream! She’s a devil!’ and then standing back
“ to laugh till his glasses dropped. Laugh? She
“ had the whole company on the titter: the chatter-
“ ing A.S.M., the stage hands, the very sweepers
“ in the stalls. What a reading! Funny? One
“ wept with delight. How did the wretched
“ author write it, do you suppose, originally, before
“ she meddled? We’ll never know now. All I
“ know is, it was tragedy on the first night, big
“ stuff, in spite of its happy ending; but now with
“ a touch here, a flick there, a swing of her hips,
“ a jerk of her chin, she petty-fied it, line after line,
“ situation after situation, flirted and giggled it
“ into light dry comedy, a stall proposition, delicate
“ and immoral. Oh, the play lost, I grant you.
“ It had had ideals, you know, and now it laughed

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“ at them. But I realized now whose ideals they
“ had been. She had poured neat spirit, proof
“ spirit into a pretty little cut-glass scent bottle,
“ good of its kind, you know, old glass, delightfully
“ faceted; but too much the ladies’ dressing-table
“ flask to hold raw spirits. Now she was putting
“ it to its proper purpose: now she was filling it
“ with scent. Maginnis went off beaming to ring
“ up the Garrick and the Green Room and every
“ friend whose friend’s friend knew an editor.
“ He was out to launch a second night upon a
“ hypnotized press. He succeeded: he wasn’t
“ Irish for nothing. He got hold of the Sunday
“ papers, too, and they and the second night
“ between them turned a *succès d’estime* into the
“ genuine box-office article. That second night
“ was a glittering success. And you can be sure
“ there were no devastating speeches allowed at the
“ end, though Damaris had to show herself of
“ course and bow and smile, and make the beauti-
“ ful gestures of a full heart. And all the time her
“ eyes roved about the house once more till my
“ heart ached.” He broke off to cock his head
raven-wise: “ What? Oh, this is anti-climax, of
“ course. I can see you saying it. She should
“ have died the night before, I admit; and so she
“ will no doubt in your tale. But this is real life,

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“ you know, and in real life people linger. They
“ don’t die on the rack but a day or two later, a
“ year or two later: and such a nuisance all the
“ while to their relations. But you, of course,
“ can omit these sequelae. What happened then?
“ Oh, then she received in her dressing-room.
“ Maginnis had insisted on that, and very brilliant
“ it all was. The little room was packed: orchids,
“ chocolates, dearest enemies, the Prime Minister’s
“ wife. When it was over she turned to me—

“ ‘ He hasn’t come, Jimmy? No, of course
“ ‘ not!’

“ Isn’t it inconceivable what crumbs women live
“ on? She had, I suppose, engineered herself out
“ of her stupor, windlassed and craned herself up
“ and up into precarious heavens ‘ on the chance.’
“ Going home she said only—

“ ‘ I’m nothing to him, of course.’ And then—
“ ‘ Why should I be?’ And then—‘ I’m a fool!’
“ And so to bed the second night.

“ She let me come into her rooms that second
“ night without protest, as a matter of course.
“ We’d come so close to each other in twenty-four
“ hours. That was my—I deny it not—loot from
“ the burning house. She sat down at the table as
“ she was, in her stage frock, the paint still on her
“ face—she had brushed aside the dresser—and

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“ let her head and shoulders fall forward on her
“ arms. Then, because her head hung so wearily,
“ as if it were intolerably weighted by her hair,
“ I began pulling out the diamond combs. She
“ let me do it. She would have allowed anything.

“ Presently, giving me a piece of news, she said—
“ ‘ Jimmy, he didn’t come.’

“ I said—

“ ‘ Damaris, he’s not worth it. Believe me, he’s
“ ‘ not worth it.’

“ She said slowly to that—

“ ‘ I wish I could die.’ And her head fell
“ forward again. What was I to do? There was
“ milk on a tray and little cakes left for us. I said—

“ ‘ Eat, my darling. You must eat.’ She hadn’t
“ touched food, you know, all day. She took the
“ glass from me meekly and put it to her lips, and
“ set it down again, untasted. Her shoulders
“ began to shake. I said to myself—‘ Tears,
“ ‘ thank God! They’ll help her!’ But she wasn’t
“ crying, she was laughing. She said—

“ ‘ Milk? Funny old Jimmy! You should give
“ ‘ me—’ She broke off. Then in a vague,
“ rambling voice—‘ I used to think it so beastly,
“ ‘ drinking. I lived with a woman once who
“ ‘ drank. I judged her. Fool I was—’ Her
“ voice trailed away. Presently she began again—

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“ ‘ I’ll never be hard on anyone for drinking.

“ ‘ Never again. I’d drink if it’d do me any good.’

“ ‘ I’ll get you—’ I began, and stopped myself
“ as I realized the folly. But you must understand,
“ Mr. Hart, that I was at the stage that I’d have
“ stolen her stuff myself, dope, drugs, any other
“ devil’s medicine, rather than watch her any
“ longer, rather than face that emptied look in her
“ eyes. Drink? I’d have rejoiced to see her drink
“ herself to death. Yes, if she’d chosen to hang
“ herself I’d have steadied the rope for her. It had
“ gone that far with me.”

I thought as he spoke that I understood at last:

“ So it’s dope, nowadays! ” I said: and, sick
and sorry as the story had made me, I was reassured
to find that from the first I had seen so straight into
the mystery, had said to him from the first, in the
stalls, how many centuries ago—‘ Something’s
wrong. Stinking fish somewhere! ’ Hadn’t I said
it? I nodded my head:

“ So that’s when it began! Poor Damaris! ”

His eyes gleamed at me from under a frown:

“ What began? ” he said sharply.

“ The taking of—whatever you gave her. She
“ plays tricks with herself. I see. Not that I
“ needed you to tell me. It’s written on her face.
“ But what is it, eh? Not cocaine—she’s too alert

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“still. What’s her stimulant? What does she play on?”

Said he—

“There are drugs and drugs. Her drug? Her pride, do you think—or her acting? Once it was her acting. She always meant to discard it. Drug takers do. Climb, climb, climb—and her hands stretched out for—his hand, Mr. Hart. And then—no more acting: no more drug! She saw him on the pinnacle, you see, the highest pinnacle of achievement, and he was to pull her, if she did her climbing patiently, victoriously, from the penultimate rung to—himself. She never doubted his supremacy. But then, you see, when unaided she reached that topmost rung, she was alone. Conceive the situation! No one there to help her: no one to hold her steady on those wuthering heights, heights, mark you, that she would never have attempted unspurred. That was the position when the play came on: and he—did not come. Well, it was the choice for her then to crash down, and she swayed to that, I think, to the mercy of the abyss (which is, I suppose, where your drugs would have come in) or to stay where she was, to stand there steadily, never losing balance, and—”

“What?”

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“ Freeze, Mr. Hart! What else? We’re not
“ meant for the heights, we modern people, none
“ of us meant for the heights, and a woman least
“ of all.”

But the drug clue was running in my head still:

“ But you said—” I began: and then eagerly—
“ What did she take to, falutin apart? You
“ needn’t be afraid. I shan’t use it. Do you
“ suppose I shall use this, any of this? But I want
“ to know.”

“ Vital, eh? ”

“ Vital.” And I was astonished at my own
passion as I said it.

He sighed, with a sudden relenting and relaxing
of his body and his manner, as if he were thinking
—‘ All right, I’ll tell you. I’m too tired to spar
with you any more.’ He even looked at me with
an expression, a curious expression of gentleness
that transformed him, that made me see him for an
instant separated from his deformities, as a man
and a good one. Is it strange that, with the aver-
sion I had from him, I could see so much, so justly?
But it’s my job to read souls. Then he said, with
another sigh—

“ What did she take to? Not drink. No. She
“ sipped her milk and crumbled her cake, and
“ slowly, lazily almost, yielding her spirit inch by

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“inch in the night hours, she took to death, Mr.—
“er—Hart. ‘Well without water’—I saw the
“water ebb away. She slept towards morning,
“sprawled over the table, and in her sleep cried out
“once or twice. Presently the dusk began to thin,
“the room lightened, and of a sudden—I must
“have drowsed too—with a burst of sunlight it
“was day. She woke as if summoned, crying—
“‘I’ll come! I’ll come!’ and with it used a
“name.”

I said with uncontrollable agitation—

“What name? What’s the matter with you
“that you can’t say the name?” But he would
not hear. He drove on—

“And springing to her feet she made for the
“window, the long open window with the red ball
“of the sun hung in its centre like a bleeding
“heart. I cried out in a panic—

“‘Damaris, where are you going? What are
“‘you going to do?’ And then—‘Damaris,
“‘don’t leave me!’ There was only a window-
“sill, a low parapet, between her and perdition.
“Wouldn’t you have cried out? And yet, had I
“the right to stop her? But my cry did stop her.
“She hesitated: she drew back, her hand at her
“head: and on that I was at her side, on my knees
“to her, catching at her frock, catching at her

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“ hands, stammering and imploring. God, how
“ selfish one is! But I stopped her. First she
“ bent her head, listening as you listen to a child’s
“ terrors that you’re too old to understand; then
“ she put her arms round me and held me a moment
“ pressed against her. Yes, she took my head
“ between her hands as my mother used to do, and
“ she was crying a little and saying—

“ ‘ Yes, yes, Jimmy dear! I’ll stay with you.
“ ‘ I’ll be good to you. Don’t you worry, poor
“ ‘ Jimmy! You see, you see, it’ll be all right! ’
“ And so forgot me again even while her fingers
“ touched me kindly. But when I stirred in those
“ dear unfeeling arms she stooped suddenly and
“ kissed me here, here on my cheek, as a sister
“ would say good-bye, and said—‘ Jimmy, I do
“ ‘ love you. You know it. Remember that I do.
“ ‘ Will you always remember even if——’

“ ‘ If what? Oh, what, Damaris? ’

“ She looked at me fumbling with her hands in
“ the hollow of her breast:

“ ‘ Jimmy, I don’t seem to feel anything, here.
“ ‘ You’ll see that I’m kind to everyone. You’ll
“ ‘ tell me, won’t you, if I make slips? I want to
“ ‘ be kind, but—somehow I don’t feel.’

“ Her eyes met mine. Did you read horrors as
‘ a boy? Remember that trial in the French

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“ chronicles, of Gilles de Retz, the man who
“ tortured children? ‘ They cried very little, but
“ the pupils of their eyes turned white.’ It’s in
“ his confession. That’s what I saw. That’s why
“ I turned away my face. And she, past all aid
“ as she was, must have seen something there that
“ for an instant held her from dissolution. She
“ said dully—

“ ‘ Jimmy, what’s the matter? You’re not
“ ‘ unhappy, are you? You mustn’t be. It’s all
“ ‘ right, you know. I’m all right, only—it’s
“ ‘ queer—I don’t seem to feel. I’m just sleepy.
“ ‘ Good-night, Jimmy!’ And with that opened
“ her bedroom door. She turned in the archway
“ to say—‘ Jimmy, you must sleep too!’ gave me a
“ smile, a carefully kind smile, and was gone.
“ At breakfast she was fagged but cheerful enough.
“ She was kept busy all day—interviews, auto-
“ graphs—you know the sort of thing. Eh? Of
“ course you do. That night you saw what
“ happened. It was farce from her first entrance,
“ roaring farce.”

“ It was always meant for farce,” I said thickly.

“ Of course it was. Damaris didn’t complain.
“ Never a complaint again: and as I say, always
“ cheerful. Went to her work: came home:
“ worked: came home. You know what she’s made

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“ of life. I’ve never left her. But—never a word
“ from her since. She can’t say the word. Why
“ not? Because she hasn’t it to say. ‘ Well without
“ ‘ water, tree whose fruit withereth, without
“ ‘ fruit—’ That’s Damaris.”

He paused; then—

“ She gives me—” he continued deliberately—
“ everything that money can buy. She likes buy-
“ ing things for me—for anyone. She gives away
“ most of her earnings. She enjoys her work. She
“ gets restless like a cat in a strange room if she has
“ to take a holiday. You saw to-night the actress
“ she has become. Popular? They adore her.
“ She gives them real tears, you see, turns them on
“ as she said that day ‘ like turning a key in a lock.’
“ Oh yes, plenty of smiles and tears she gives them.
“ Why not? The mechanism has been oiled. The
“ oiling will last her time. That’s genius, I think,
“ a mechanism that once has been oiled.”

I struggled against the conviction that was
sucking me under as a quaking sand sucks coldly,
inch by inch with—

“ I don’t admire your metaphors.”

“ No, I’m no writer. I witness. She’ll keep
“ her beauty till the end, I think. Why not? She
“ devours herself no longer. She burns nothing
“ away. She’ll eat and drink and delight us till

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“ she’s eighty. Why not? Why do you look at
“ me like that? You can’t silence me. You can’t
“ choke the life out of me—there’s no room for
“ your hands. Why shouldn’t I discuss our
“ Damaris? Private? She belongs to every eye
“ and every tongue, doesn’t she, that pays to
“ appraise her? ”

I screamed at him like a woman. I heard myself—

“ Stop—you—! ” But he overbore me:

“ Why? ‘ She’s dead, she’s drowned, brother! ’
“ There’s no law against dissecting the souls of the
“ dead, is there, so long as you respect their
“ coffins? I hope not—or there’d be many a bio-
“ grapher in trouble.”

I said deliberately, and I didn’t know my own voice as I said it—

“ This lady——”

He interrupted anew—

“ Call and call again !

“ You’ve forgotten how it goes—

“ Call and call again !

She’ll never hear.

She’s dead, she’s drowned, brother !

In Wandon Weir.

“ You shouldn’t have taken her to Wandon,
“ Mr. Hart, to pick cherries in—kissing time.”

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“ I? ”

“ You! ”

I said to him earnestly—

“ She took no harm from me. Whoever is responsible, she took no harm from me. She might ‘ have been my sister—’ ” and thought, angrily, as I said it—‘ Why should I justify myself? ’ Yet I justified myself anew, while he watched me in silence. “ I swear to you she took no harm from me.”

“ No? ” he said at last suddenly. “ Not even a kiss? Not one kiss to try if she were sweet? ”

“ She was a woman I entirely respected.”

“ I make you my felicitations, honourable man! ’ he said gravely, and without warning went off into a fit of laughter, laughter like a knife on a plate: “ Damaris, my darling, my darling, do you hear him? Damaris, can’t you laugh? ” and thereby, of course, gave himself into my hands. I could confute before I dismissed him, him and his nettlerags of invention. I said dispassionately—

“ You appear to confuse the issues. What do my relations with her matter? If I understand you rightly——”

“ I hope,” he said, “ that you begin to.”

“ —Damaris Payne was in love——”

“ Loved,” he corrected.

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"Where's the difference?"

"You see none?"

"Loved or was in love, whichever you prefer, with——"

"With the author of *The Lover*. It's my contention. It is what I offer you, in collaboration."

"*The Lover*—the author of *The Lover*?" I let myself go at last: "You lie badly, clumsily, Mr. Cairns. Oh, your ingenuities may pass with the general, but you shouldn't have come to me."

"No?" says he politely, looking down at his thumb fretting against his finger nail.

"You with your surmises and your prying, your emotional analogies and psycho-analytical sneers! Oh, I'll give you letters of introduction! I know hundreds you'll go down with. But you shouldn't have come to the man who knew the facts. In love with the author of her star part! Piquant! Appetizing! But you shouldn't have planted that particular lie on the man who knew. You shouldn't have revealed it to the author himself."

"No?" says he again.

"Why, you fool, you fool, you fool!" I can still hear my own crow of laughter: "*I* wrote it! Greydon's my pen-name! Now!" and waited triumphant for his blank face of unbelief.

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But he went on gently, smiling a little—

“Why, of course, Mr. Hart! But that was understood from the beginning.”

I stumbled to my feet:

“Don’t you hear me? *I* wrote it!” I cried, hammering at the table between us. “*I* wrote it! *I!* Take it in, and then be off! I asked for facts not fiction. You lose your pay.”

“I shall be paid before I go,” says he, black and staring—“paid in full. I’ve given you facts. Don’t be afraid! I leave the fiction—” and again he lurched towards me, and again it took me a second to comprehend that he was pointing his insult with a bow—“to a master of the art. You’ll dress it before you publish it, no doubt. Who cares? That’s your business. I’m satisfied with giving you the facts. I doubt if you’ll forget ’em. Your royalties still come in from *The Lover*, don’t they? They’ll remind you.”

And at that moment, on that word, I believed. There was an awful cold at my heart. It’s strange how bravely one takes a mortal shock. In books there’s a scream, a struggle, a spectacular collapse; but in real life, how quietly it slips into your heart, the thin sudden knife! You hardly feel it. That empress who was stabbed—they say she walked all down the quay and across the plank and the deck

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and down to her state-room before she fell, before she died.

I was quite easy in manner. I did not start or move, but I had a lump in my throat that took me back to my childhood when I'd been burdened with unfair blame. I remember too that the air of the room seemed so dank and cold as I drew breath quickly, that I turned mechanically to see if the fire had died. It still burned quite clear. I turned back to Cairns:

"It's been deliberate then? You knew me? You meant me? All along, your Robinson meant *me*?"

"Quick in the uptake! Congratulations!"

But I said wondering—

"Damaris? Damaris? Why should she love me?" And then—"Nobody told me. How was I to know?"

"Nobody told you!" He began to laugh, a little high laugh that was oddly familiar, that was—yes, that was like Damaris. Like Damaris! My head whirled. A hundred, a thousand heads of Damaris rose smiling and scared, propitiating, defiant, the kissing mouths turned up to me, the eyes speaking, full glance. How was I to know? I joined him in his laughter and we rocked together in that peopled room.

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“ Ay! ” said he at last, wiping his eyes, “ How
“ were you to know? When you came to her that
“ third night at the end of the second act, with your
“ approval and your offers and your plans, how
“ were you to know?—‘ Well, it’s congratulations
“ ‘ and good-bye, Damaris! I’m off to America! ’
“ You remember? And she held out her hand to
“ you, not turning, while she reddened her lips,
“ and she said to you—‘ Good luck! ’ ”

I remembered. Then indeed I remembered. The scene re-lived itself more vividly than ever in factual existence it had done. It came into my mind like some hackneyed great speech one has learned at school, grown, after many years, significant. Oh, I remembered then, and realized that I must indeed have seen without seeing, passed and overlooked him, a shadow among the empty hanging garments in the corner, a shape that whispered with the dresser and was as little to be noticed. For I stood again in the dressing-room with its looking-glasses and its bleaching lights. The sour-sweet theatre reek was in my nostrils, of paint and gas and sweat and hothouse flowers. Her cold hand, blue-white with zinc, clutched mine once more and I felt again the momentary awkward drag as if in turning not to me, she had lost her balance and swung uncentred. Her look has gone

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from me; but across a hollow between breast and shoulder where should have swelled firm flesh, I noted how slack lay the folds of her gorgeous dress, as if her body had shrunk suddenly and withered in its sheaf. And then I heard her voice—no, his unescapable voice—

“ She said to you—‘ Good luck! ’ ”

I cried out to him—

“ It’s enough. I remember. It’s enough! ”

Again I said—

“ I never saw—I never dreamed——”

And again—

“ If I had known——”

He said—

“ What would you have done? ”

What would I have done? I raced in my mind through my last ten years in answer to that nightmare pause of his, and it was made very clear to me what I might have done, where I might have triumphed, what I might have possessed. For suddenly all the hidden, not gladly remembered intimacies of a casual life transformed themselves into sweet and memorable moments. Little Goldie Renfrew, that pretty straw on the current, took on the air of Damaris and was steadfast: and the dark girl on the steamer was Damaris: and the shrew at Trinidad had Damaris’s kind eyes. And

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Damaris was at my elbow to hold me back, that gamblers' night in Rome: and the monstrous thing that tended me through the fever, with the black serge hood and sour old woman's breath, was changed to Damaris with her cool, cool finger-tips—what did he say? 'Like all the buds of spring.' It was Damaris who parched with me that stifling summer in New York, and Damaris who was so grave and reverend with me in the London lion-houses at roaring time, and laughed at me, with me, afterwards as we drove to our hotel. I wiped out boredom, heaviness, and care, and all uncleanness too I wiped away. And I worked. How I worked! What great stuff I poured out to Damaris! I built a home to house us, and planted a garden and made roses grow. I had my servants and my cattle, my friends and my lovers, and my children to keep me young. All this I had, ten years of it, in a streaking, searing flash of thought: all this she gave me in the very utterance of her name. Ah well, that was always her business—she could always give me ideas. As I saw now, so clearly, she had always given me my dreams.

He broke in upon that vision, or was it the last word of his same sentence that still quivered in the air?

"What would you have done?"

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I suppose I must have risen at that, for he spoke again, and in an altered tone, saying sharply—

“Where are you going? What are you going to do?”

“Go to her!”

“Now?”

I caught, as man sees a strange town pass him from a train window, my stranger face flash by me from the mirror as I moved, with, at last (witness it, oh mocking heavens!) that envied look upon it, the look of secret delight. And I knew, that strange face of mine told me, that I was of their fellowship at last, that I too had a treasure laid up. I knew it. I felt it. Warm and stirring it lay in the hollow of my heart.

“Now!” I said.

“And then?” said he. “What then?”

I turned in a sort of sweet triumph:

“Then? Love her! Marry her! God, for a little happiness!” And so turned the handle of the door and would have gone. But his laughter was like a lasso:

“Love? Marriage? Will you lie with a dead woman?”

I flung at him—

“You’re raving. You’re crazed with jealousy; because she’s mine. Not yours—mine! I’ve

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“had her soul in my hand ten years. Can't I warm it back to life?”

But he had recovered himself. Yes, that's the word. He had drawn a covering over his naked grief. He answered me, not bitter, not hostile any more, pitying as a father, just as a god, passionless—

“Ask and have! She'll give you her body if you ask her. Anything she possesses she'll give. She retains the mechanism of graciousness. But she hasn't got a soul to give. You killed it.”

“A soul can't die!” I shouted like a parson, and believed it.

“Can't it? What! Does it take to itself wings? Grub and butterfly, eh? But brush your grub from its green leaf and get it under your heel—so—so—” and heavily he dragged his club foot to and fro on the carpet before me—“What's left of Psyche then? A smear of slime and gravel! Go and see!”

And I went. I went to her in the raw morning, as I was, unshaven and dishevelled from the night. I went to her in a blind hurry, with no more belief in Cairns' ravings than a Jew in his prophets whom he stones. Why, I had no thought at all of Cairns or anyone or anything but myself and her. I wanted to see her, to touch her, to prove her. Damaris! Damaris! I sang her with my whole

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body and soul. Life lay between us two, and there was nothing, no extreme of pain or passion that I could not and would not make good to her, nothing that I could not blot out, nothing that I could not revive. Revive? Awake thou that sleepest! Damaris! Damaris!

But when I came, but when I came—ah, Damaris, you did not love me truly after all, to fail me so! Could you not watch for me— Blasphemy? Blasphemy indeed. The sorrows of God are sinless: what are they to the sorrows of a man? But could you not watch for me if you loved me so? That's not love, to die for a kick, for a blow: to be empty when I come to you, thirsty, thirsty! Oh well without water, is that love? What are women for, then, who boast they can bear pain? What have you left me to believe?

No one could have told her I was coming; but she was waiting for me—waiting for me with that air, as Cairns said, of having nothing else to do but wait for me. A hotel sitting-room, breakfast time. All the little tables staring. God knows what they made of my waiter's dress and unshaven chin. But she—did she even see? We talked. Gracious—she was that—kind, natural, exactly as she used to be, as I remembered her, scarcely older, scarcely surer, in spite of her physical maturity. Yet after

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five minutes I saw her even physically youthening as if my appearance were but a reappearance, an old cause exacting its old effect. She grew, in the old way, quaintly, faintly awkward. Her tongue tripped. She was stilted, and now I liked it, and yet it hurt me a little that she, she with half a world at her feet, with me at last at her feet, must be in the old fashion apologetic for her beauty, for her wit, for her very kindness. She was—oh, I remembered well enough now and perceived clearly—her old, by me then unrealized yet now so clearly realized self. Cairns' words returned to me with what bitter conviction of truth it is difficult to express—'She retains the mechanism of graciousness!' Yes, the mechanism was there still. I—pressed the button, as it were, and she appeared, the perfect servant of my requirements.

I say that we talked. She gave me breakfast. I paid her my compliments on her successes and she swept them from her in a little shower of questioning allurements, little ardent intensities of eyes and mouth that always did, that began once more to unlock my tongue. No, there was nothing lacking save, as I remembered now that I missed it so, the former beautiful crimson in her cheeks as she welcomed me: and in her eyes—nothing, nothing left of me.

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But it was her laugh that in the end drove me from her, from her and from all hope for ever. I heard her laugh. I talked to her and at the right moments she laughed. What did he say? 'Like a bird, like a child!' No, no, like bells, like musical glasses, like any hollow thing without a soul.

So there's the story—and I ask you, by any justice in any earth or heaven, what have I done that this should have happened to me, that she should have happened to me? Am I God to have seen and known? Is it not monstrous that she should speak and move about the earth still—and laugh? I tell you I've heard her! I'm haunted. I have no peace. Do you think it is nothing to sit a meal out with a dead woman, to touch her cold fingers, and to hear her laugh?

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